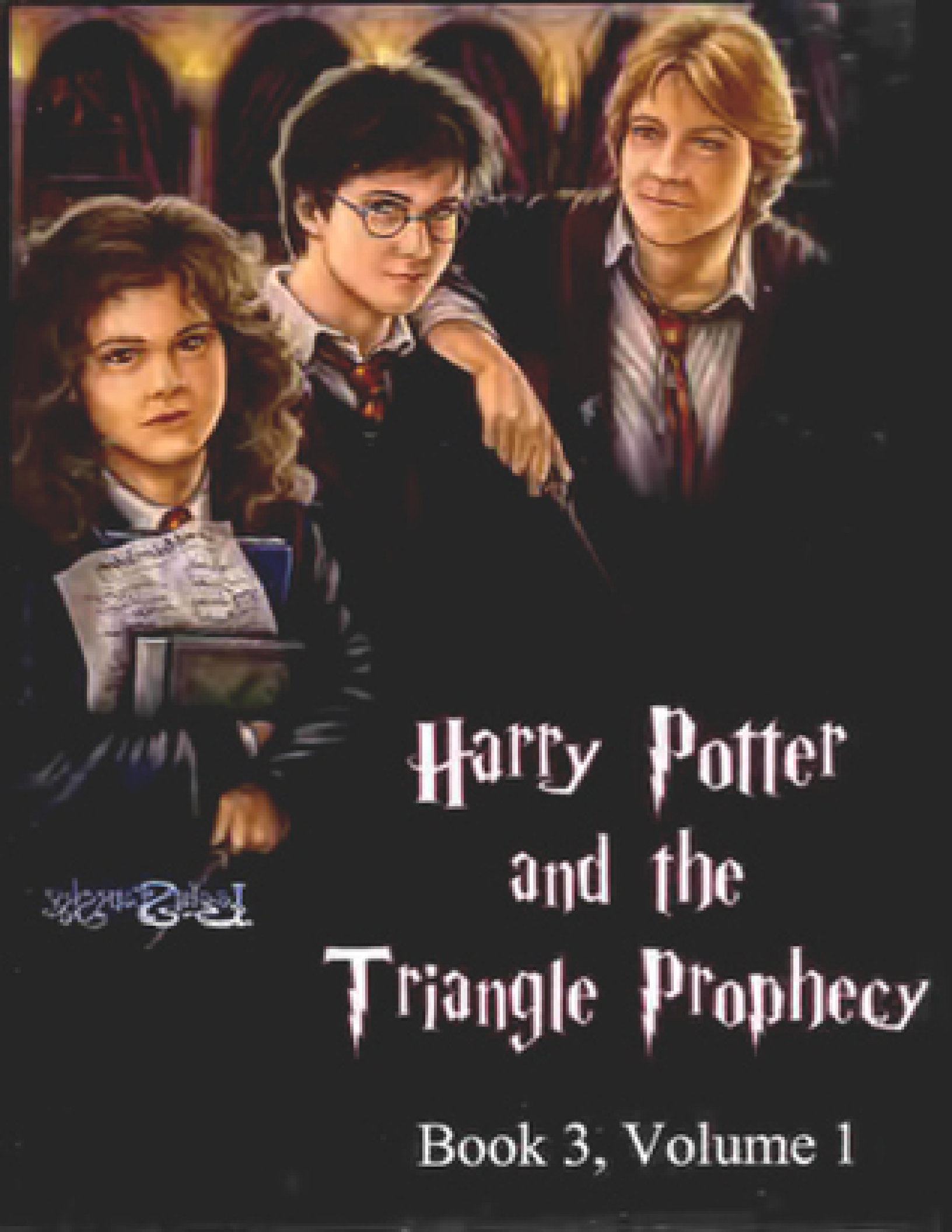




Harry Potter and the Triangle Prophecy

Book 3, Volume 1

Volume 3

Shelter

Time had lost all meaning for Harry Potter. He was about to live through what would undoubtedly be the longest month of his life. In one month he would be seventeen. It might as well be one *century* away, he thought. Normally, he spent the summer marking off days on a homemade calendar counting down to the first of September, when he would be able to return to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, but now he had a nearer goal, which, in spite of that, seemed far more elusive than his return to school usually did.

Although non-magic teenagers might normally be counting down to their seventeenth birthdays because it would mean the opportunity to finally have a driver's license, Harry was counting down to this day because he would be of age in the wizarding world. He would no longer have to worry about avoiding doing magic outside of school. He could begin learning to Apparate. He could even vote for the Minister of Magic, if a vote was held. (There hadn't been a vote in the last sixteen years, as far as he knew. Harry almost wished there would at least be a vote of no-confidence, but he wasn't sure what the point would be, as the only person people wanted to be Minister, other than Fudge, was Albus Dumbledore, who preferred to be the headmaster of Hogwarts). Right before his birthday he would be leaving the Dursleys forever and going to live with his godfather, Sirius Black, in Scotland. Although he was definitely looking forward to that, it was the birthday he was *really* anticipating.

Naturally, having all of these things to look forward to meant that each twenty-four-hour day felt more like twenty-four years. In the short time he'd been home he thought he would go mad from the *waiting*. Plus, in addition to the usual daily verbal abuse he had to tolerate from his aunt and uncle (and their annoying little Yorkshire terrier, Dunkirk, who hated Harry with a passion) was the fact that they had decided to use the last month of his tenure with them to squeeze as much free labor out of him as possible. It had begun on his third morning back from school.

Harry had risen early to go running as usual, having dashed out of the house just clear of the snapping jaws of the highly-annoyed terrier. While he made a circuit around the park, he noticed with interest that there was a

large tent erected in the middle of the green, near the artificial lake that was created with funds raised by the Royal Gardening Society of Little Whinging, of which his aunt was recording secretary (she'd been angling for president for years, with no luck, as Agnes Bringham kept successfully campaigning against her). The tent was very large and white, with mesh "windows" giving one the impression that you could put your hands through the openings. When Harry peered through one of these, he saw two men in jumpsuits setting up white folding chairs in neat rows with an aisle down the centre. The chairs faced a dais with a handful of chairs looking back at the audience. The dais was skirted in white, so the supports weren't visible.

Must be a wedding, he decided. It was the end of June, after all. He looked up at the blue cloudless sky. The wedding party was overcompensating for the weather; if they had thought that they'd guarantee clear skies by ordering a tent, it seemed to have worked. (Although his aunt and uncle were adamant that the word "magic" not be uttered in their house, they were absolutely convinced that carrying an umbrella was a fool-proof charm against rain. Harry knew that they were hardly alone in this very common Muggle superstition, yet people carried umbrellas in Britain almost all the time and it rained quite a lot).

Harry turned away from the tent and immediately collided with a very familiar person who was panting heavily. He hadn't realized this person had walked right up to the tent and was also peering in the mesh window. Harry frowned. He had last seen him on the platform at King's Cross, and had not been looking forward to seeing him again so soon.

"How considerate —" *wheeze!* "— of you to let me know —" *gasp!* "— you were going running, Potter —" *gulp!* "— and to let me hare after you —" *pant!* "— for a mile while you went on, oblivious —"

Harry frowned. "I didn't know you were behind me, Malfoy, else I'd have stopped." He wouldn't have *wanted* to stop, but he knew it would be good form to stop. "You could have *said* something."

Draco Malfoy collapsed on the ground next to the tent. "No. I. Couldn't." He breathed heavily for another minute, then looked like he was starting to get his breath back. "When did you get so damn fast?" he said in a rush. "Have you been holding out on us when we were running round the Quidditch pitch every morning?"

Harry shrugged, trying very hard not to grin smugly. "I might have been without knowing it. Where've you been for the last two days? It wasn't like I expected you. I just started running and running." He glanced around at the green of the park. "It's nice to be back." He remembered his fleeting moments of missing Surrey in his other life. It felt like he'd been gone for a thousand years.

Malfoy frowned. "I took a break for a couple of days, but this morning, I just had to get out. I can't believe I'm stuck in that house with my old nanny again. All summer. *And* stuck in this hell known as Surrey. Gah. *It's nice to be back?* Are you *mental*?"

Now Harry grinned. "Chin up, Malfoy. Stiff upper lip and all that. After all, you get to live with all those lovely kitties..." he taunted, knowing how Malfoy detested — indeed, feared — cats of all kinds.

Malfoy lunged for him and Harry hopped nimbly out of the way, starting to jog in place. "Come on. We can run back together, if you like. I can drop in and say hello to Mrs. Figg. She's not all that bad. Even when she snaps, she's not as bad as my aunt. She's just a bit like —"

"— Mad Eye Moody. Yeah, I know. But younger and female. As if that's an improvement."

Harry considered. "Well — she doesn't have a magic eye. That's something. You'd never get any privacy if she did."

Malfoy shuddered. "Okay, now I'm going to have to get *that* image out of my mind..."

Harry started running back toward Privet Drive, laughing, but tempering his pace until the other boy had caught up with him. As they jogged, Harry said, "So. I guess we'd better go back to first names. For the summer."

He received a nod in return, as Draco was turning quite red and dripping with sweat. When they reached Mrs. Figg's house, they both collapsed on the lawn and did some warm-down exercises before going round the back to enter through the kitchen door. Mrs. Figg had gone out early, leaving a note, so Harry bade Draco Malfoy farewell and returned to the Dursleys' to shower and eat breakfast.

When he entered the kitchen, his aunt was dishing up kippers for his uncle, and the dog was sitting in Dudley's old spot at the table, waiting for his own kippers with ears standing at attention and his front paws on the edge of the table. It would have been cute if it hadn't been *Dunkirk*, the

hound from hell. Harry went to the fridge for some orange juice, bumping his head painfully on the top of the opening when his aunt screeched at him.

"You! You got a call from that *Dick*. Wants you to work for him again."

Harry had been expecting Dick Abernathy to call, who was really Aberforth Dumbledore, his headmaster's brother. Abernathy Landscaping was a thriving business which also employed the wizard Sam Bell, who had served ten years in Azkaban for casting a spell which caused his wife's death. Sam was Katie Bell's dad; Harry had played on the Gryffindor Quidditch team with Katie for six years, but now she was out of school. He liked Sam and looked forward to seeing him again.

Vernon Dursley put down his newspaper and looked at Harry with narrowed eyes. "Oh, no you don't. You're not spending your last month here working for someone else and making money hand over fist. You're going to make up for all those years of free room and board, you are. You will make yourself *useful*. Starting tomorrow, when you go for that morning run of yours, you're going to take Dunkirk with you. He needs more exercise. You'll walk him in the evening as well. And you're going to replace the roof. Needs it badly. Last time it rained, it leaked right over our bed, and in our en suite bath, and over Dudley's desk and in the guest room as well. *Your* room seems to be the only one *without* a leak. You wouldn't know anything about *that*, would you?"

Harry dropped his jaw. "I spent most of last summer at Mrs. Figg's, so I haven't even set foot in this house for almost a year. What would I know about leaks in the roof?"

Vernon made a *harumphing* sort of noise. "I wouldn't put it past you..."

"*And*", Harry went on, "I have no intention of fixing your roof. I already did your garden landscaping for practically nothing."

"Nothing! Five pounds a day that cost us!" his aunt screeched, as though this represented a fortune. Harry groaned.

"You're not *serious*? You actually expect me to fix the roof?" He stared back and forth between their two equally-repugnant faces. He folded his arms and held his ground. "Well, you can't make me."

Vernon folded his paper and raised his eyebrows at his wife. "You hear that, Petunia? From the ingrate who's lived here for sixteen years —"

"Fifteen-and-a-half", Harry corrected him.

"— eating our food and wearing the clothes our money bought him —"

"— clothes that were Dud — er, someone else's first —"

"— and this is the way he responds when we ask him to do us a *tiny* favor..."

"*Tiny!*" Harry exploded. "You want me to fix the bloody roof!"

"Not just fix — replace. Completely. It's been ages. No good in repairing something that old. Needs an entirely new covering."

Harry's jaw dropped. "You must be mad. I am *not* replacing the roof. I am working for Dick starting tomorrow, and *that's final*."

"Final, he says", Vernon said in a musing voice, standing to leave. "Final. Do you hear that, Petunia?" His voice had become soft and sing-song. She nodded, her mouth very thin. "Final. Well", he went on, his voice louder and more menacing now. "We'll just see about that."

And with a knowing and triumphant look, he stalked out of the kitchen to go to work at the Grunnings Drill factory. Harry frowned after him. Brilliant. A row with my uncle at the beginning of the summer. Just what I need.

But Harry had a queasy feeling about this. What, exactly, did Vernon Dursley mean by *We'll just see about that*?

* * *

Harry talked with Aberforth on the phone after eating lunch; the next morning he was to be at Mrs. Figg's at eight o'clock sharp for Sam to drive him and Draco to the estate where they'd planted the trees during the previous summer. They were doing more elaborate landscaping on the grounds, building a garden folly to look like a Greek temple and putting in a lot of shrubbery which would then be carefully sculpted. Harry was looking forward to the job. He spent the day alternately sunning himself in the garden and, when he grew bored, he pulled some weeds or pruned some roses and made a mental note that the bench needed a coat of paint. And then he remembered that in the fuss over the roof, he hadn't had a chance to register his displeasure with the order to take Dunkirk on walks. As if that dog would do anything *he* wanted him to! He wondered whether the real goal all along had been to turn him into Dunkirk's walker, and the roof was just a diversion.

When he went indoors to make a sandwich for lunch, he heard voices coming from the upstairs. One was his Aunt Petunia, but he wasn't sure about the other, as it was muffled. He walked into the front hall, unsure what he would find, and was startled when his uncle suddenly came

jogging down the stairs, an unnaturally happy grin on his face and a Grunnings drill in one hand. Upon seeing Harry, he turned his smile on him, and Harry fought the urge to recoil.

"Hello, there! Just stopping home briefly. It's so *convenient* to work for a company that produces such *excellent* drills! Must get back to the office now!" And then he was gone; he strode outside and through the glass in the door Harry saw him get into his car. He had taken the drill with him. It looked like a very large drill, and Harry had noticed that the bit was also very large, capable of boring a hole at least an inch in diameter.

He turned, startled again, when his aunt came down the stairs. She was brushing what looked like white powder from her clothes. When she saw him, she looked even more smug than his uncle. She passed him without a word and went to the kitchen. Harry shook his head; he just could not wait for the day he didn't have to live with two such mental people any more. His brief bout of missing Surrey was very effectively cured.

After he ate his lunch, he decided to go to Mrs. Figg's. He had been putting it off, but there was no denying that Draco Malfoy needed to know about the Obedience Charm Voldemort had put on him when he was a baby. He'd been distracted by the tent in the park and had not thought to tell him that morning. What if Voldemort did the same thing with Malfoy he'd done with Harry the previous September, used the *Tempus Fugit* spell to talk to him? What if he gave him a direct order and Malfoy refused? Malfoy would drop dead in a second. And if he agreed to whatever it was, lying, and thinking, 'Well, I just won't *do* it', he'd get the shock of his life when he felt magically compelled to do it anyway. There was no denying it: Malfoy had to know.

He thought about his mother telling him about the Obedience Charm in the cave, before she tried to kill Ron. Why hadn't she told him before his initiation? It would have been nice to know. Perhaps, in that setting, she expected him to have the sense to do as he was told. Luckily, he wasn't told to do anything like engage in cannibalism. He managed to spirit away Viktor Krum's body before it came to that. Perhaps that's what Voldemort was after, he thought. Perhaps he was counting on my refusing to eat part of a human, and Draco Malfoy too, and then we'd have dropped dead and he wouldn't have had to worry about us any more... perhaps there was more to that than gaining Viktor's power by consuming his still-warm body...

He shuddered, feeling his lunch move uncomfortably within him as he walked to Mrs. Figg's in the warm June afternoon. *Malfoy had to know*. He could have died at his initiation in *this* life. Harry remembered the way he had interrupted Voldemort to suggest using the *Hara Kiri* curse on Karkaroff. (Fortunately, the Obedience Charm carried no penalty for rudeness). Harry thought about a *father* who would put a curse like *Hara Kiri* on his *son*, and he stopped being surprised that Lucius Malfoy had said nothing about the Obedience Charm.

When he reached the house, the car wasn't in the drive, so he assumed Mrs. Figg was out. He knocked at the door, receiving no answer. He waited several minutes, then walked around to the rear; no one was in the garden, either. Malfoy had gone out as well, it seemed. To give himself something to do while he waited, he set to work weeding Mrs. Figg's peony border, which was being encroached by dandelions. He knew that in her terse, gruff way, she'd be grateful.

Harry lost track of time, and finally he heard the sound of Mrs. Figg's elderly maroon Ford trundling into the drive. He looked up from his weeding and got a shock; Mrs. Figg wasn't driving, *Draco Malfoy* was. His jaw dropped open in astonishment.

Malfoy emerged from the driver's side of the car, grinning and leaning on the open door, saying, "Oh, that's attractive, Potter. Keep it up and you might solve our bug problem, though."

Harry clamped his mouth shut again. He looked at the car and then Mrs. Figg, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. "You did this!" he declared, seeing her blanch upon being accused. She looked flustered and put her hand to her breastbone.

"Well, you see, I, um... oh dear..." her voice quavered.

Malfoy slammed the car door. "Oh, lighten up, Potter. Muggle red tape is ridiculous. Who hasn't wished they could move things along a bit, skip steps like getting a provisional license..."

"But — but —" Harry sputtered. "You're not supposed to do more than *wish* it! You're not supposed to use magic to —"

"Hush!" Mrs. Figg declared, suddenly losing her feeble-old-woman façade. With a wave of her hand, Harry's mouth was sealed. Or rather, it was gone. He put his hands up to the place where his mouth had been. There was slightly bristly uninterrupted skin from his nose to his chin; no orifice whatsoever.

"*Mmm mmm MMM!*" Harry yelled to the best of his ability. He at least still had a voice box in his throat, from which the noise emanated. Draco Malfoy looked like he was about to roll about on the ground laughing fit to kill.

"Get in the house!" the old woman snapped irritably. Harry's throaty moans grew louder and more indignant. "Well, that'll teach you to shut yer yob in public, won't it?" She sighed and shook her head as she herded the boys toward the house. "Muggle upbringing, no sense..." Draco Malfoy was turning purple from trying not to laugh at the mouthless, irate Harry.

Once they were in the kitchen again, Mrs. Figg waved her hand casually at Harry, and his mouth reappeared. He gasped and immediately took up yelling again. "What the hell was that? What are you going to do next? Turn *him* into a bouncing ferret, like your brother did?"

She squinted at him. "*What?*"

"When she removed your mouth she must have removed a few brain cells as well, Potter. That wasn't the real Moody, remember? And —" he lowered his voice, "*don't give her any ideas.*"

Harry threw himself grumpily into a kitchen chair. "Point out that someone's breaking the law, and the next thing you know your mouth is gone. It isn't like I grassed on anyone..."

She was standing at the cooker, putting the kettle on, even though it was a very warm day. He remembered that she never considered it too warm for a cuppa. She waved her hand at the kettle and it almost immediately started whistling. She waggled her eyebrows at the cupboard, and three cups and saucers flew to the table, joined by three spoons soaring from the drawer next to the cooker. With a slight finger movement, the kettle was pouring water into the old brown teapot, which then floated to the table, along with the sugar bowl and cream pitcher.

Mrs. Figg sat down opposite Harry and nodded at him. "You can be mother", she told him, and he grimaced, irked that she hadn't even apologized for hexing him. But he reached out and poured the already-perfectly-steeped tea into their respective cups.

As they took turns with the cream pitcher and sugar lumps, Mrs. Figg spoke. "Now, Harry, hear me out and don't pass judgment until you know what's what. First, I want to ask you a question. How exactly do you think a witch or wizard who didn't grow up in the Muggle world goes about getting a license to drive an automobile?"

Harry shrugged. "The same way everybody else does. You go to the post office and fill out the form, then send it to the DVLA..."

"And what does the witch or wizard use for identification?"

"I dunno. A passport. A birth certificate. The usual sort of thing."

"Harry, as far as the British government is concerned, we *don't exist*. Unless we do a little wand-waving, we don't *have* Muggle birth certificates or passports. And I wanted Draco to have a license with a minimum of waiting and bureaucracy, so I just — sped things up a bit."

"In addition to creating a false identity for him."

"Oh, his license says *Draco Malfoy*. However, it lists this address as his official residence and June 7 for his birthdate, rather than July 7, and of course, his provisional license dates back to June 7 as well..."

"You couldn't wait one more week for him to turn seventeen? Even if he doesn't exist as far as the government knows, you could at least generate a birth certificate for him with the correct birthdate and apply for a provo and wait for it to come in the post like anyone else..."

Mrs. Figg finished her tea and put her teacup down with a clatter. "You, Harry Potter, do not know what you are talking about. How do you think your friend Aberforth Dumbledore has functioned in business all these years? Do you think he explains to all of his clients that he's really a wizard and that his name isn't Dick Abernathy? Do you think he shows government employees a one-hundred-forty-year-old birth certificate issued by the Ministry of Magic? Grow up — you've lived for years in the Muggle world. Your parents had your birth recorded in Cardiff and you have a record of attending a Muggle school. The queen's government believes you're a person. That was not true of Draco. I have wards on my house preventing anyone from Apparating in or out, now that Draco's staying with me again. I can't very well take off on my broom any time I want — not that I care for brooms at my age — and it's a security risk to have my fireplace on the Floo Network. I do not care for driving; my reflexes and vision are not what they used to be. If you had your choice, would you rather I was behind the wheel of an automobile or Draco?"

Harry grimaced and Draco Malfoy mumbled, "Typical *Gryffindor* reaction..."

"Typical *Slytherin* behavior, circumventing the rules, anything to achieve an end..."

"Now, now. All wizards who suddenly find themselves needing to function in the Muggle world do it. And your beloved Aberforth was a Hufflepuff. So there", she said, as though that settled it. Harry drank his tea, still feeling miffed about his mouth.

"And", he shot at Malfoy, "your girlfriend is a Gryffindor, and everyone in her family, whom you're trying to impress, so I wouldn't advise you to make too many comments about 'typical Gryffindor' behavior around the Weasleys..."

"*Speaking* of Weasleys, weren't *you* the one who *flew* to school in the Weasleys' car at the beginning of second year? Weren't beyond breaking more than a few rules there, were you? If I remember correctly, it was all over the *Evening Prophet* that night that loads of Muggles had seen you, and then there was another story a few months later about Weasley's dad getting in trouble at work because of it..."

"He's also *Ginny's* dad, and you'd better stop being so smug about that if you ever expect him to let you near his daughter again."

Mrs. Figg sighed and waved her hand; the cups and saucers and other tea things hurled themselves into the sink, which started filling with a mixture of hot and cold water from the separate taps. Harry frowned; he'd had his teacup to his mouth, still drinking, and it had flown out of his hand.

"That's enough", she said. "You didn't know we'd gone to Swansea to get Draco his license, obviously, so you must have come for some other reason besides accusing us of high crimes and misdemeanors."

Harry grimaced. In the fuss over Mrs. Figg bending the rules, he'd almost forgotten. Of course, that was what had happened virtually every day since he'd restored the timelines — something always seemed to get him sidetracked before he could find a moment to talk to Malfoy about the Obedience Charm.

"Well, I recently found out something that I thought Malfoy — er, Draco — should know. Actually, I'm surprised you didn't tell him — wait. Maybe you did..."

Draco Malfoy looked back and forth between Harry and Mrs. Figg. "All right. I give up. What are you talking about?"

Mrs. Figg scowled. "Yes, Harry. What *are* you talking about?"

Harry drew his lips into a line. "Okay. Here's what I know." He turned to Malfoy. "When you were about a year old, Voldemort came to your

parents because of the Prophecy. He gave them a choice: raise you to be his servant or he'd kill you. They chose to cooperate, and he put a spell on you as a kind of insurance. It was an Obedience Charm."

Draco Malfoy looked at his former nanny. "Did you know about this?"

She shook her head vigorously. "This is news to me. How did you find out, Harry?"

How did he find out? *Oh*, he could say, *I was trying to prevent my mum killing Ron Weasley, and she explained to me that she was doing it so I wouldn't be ordered to by Voldemort, because if I refused, I'd die...* Right. I'm going to have to deal with this *I can't tell you* stuff all over again.

"I can't — well, how really isn't the important part. The important thing is the way the spell works. If you —" he nodded at Draco Malfoy, "received a direct order from Voldemort, you'd have to either agree to whatever it was or refuse to do whatever it was..."

The blond boy smirked. "And how is that any different from *not* being under an Obedience Charm?"

"What happens after that is what's different. If you agree to do whatever you're told, even if you were lying and never had any intention of doing it, once you agree, you *will* do whatever it is, or die in the attempt. If it's at all possible, that is. For instance, if you're told to kill someone who's already dead, there's no effect. It can't be overcome, like Imperius."

Draco Malfoy frowned. "Well *that's* definitely not good. I mean, I wouldn't have been able to lie at the initiation, since there were so many other people around, but that's why I suggested using the Japanese spell, so I couldn't be sent to prison for performing an Unforgivable Curse, if anyone in the Ministry ever found out..."

Harry shuddered. *He* had performed two of the three Unforgivable Curses; he had attempted to kill Tom Riddle with one, and he had influenced his mother with Imperius when he changed the timelines. He'd never put Cruciatu on anyone, though.

"Yeah", he went on. "That's why I thought you should know. Lying won't do any good in a situation like that."

Draco Malfoy stared down at the table.

When the uncomfortable silence had stretched for quite some time, Harry cleared his throat. "There's — there's more."

Mrs. Figg looked up. "How much more?"

"Well — if Voldemort gives you", he nodded at Draco Malfoy, "a direct order and you refuse to do it —" He stopped; he didn't know how to do this. How had his mother put it?

"Well?" Malfoy burst out. "What?"

"You'll drop dead." He just blurted it out. Malfoy stared.

"What?"

Harry nodded, remembering the cave again, the wild look in his mother's eyes...

"But", he added, "there's actually one good thing. Kind of."

"Kind of?" Malfoy practically squeaked. "What? I get some wizarding trading stamps? What could possibly make up for what you just told me?"

"I didn't say it makes up for it. I said there was a good thing about all this. Okay, not a good thing precisely — more like something that's not awful."

"Well, that's not exactly the same, is it? What the hell is it?"

"Well — when he performs this spell — or when anyone performs it — he gives up a part of his power and you get it. The idea is — since he wants to use you to do things, the extra power makes it more likely you'll succeed. The power leaves him. That's why he wanted your parents to agree to raise you to be his servant; if they didn't, and he put the Obedience Charm on you and then started giving you orders when you were older — if you didn't know about what would happen by refusing to do as you're told and you didn't feel any loyalty to him — you could just say 'no' and drop dead. If that were to happen, all of the power he'd put into you would just die with you — he wouldn't get that back."

Malfoy looked very grumpy. "That's hardly what I'd call 'good'."

"Well, you *do* have a little more power than most wizards. Some of his power went into me, too, when he tried to kill me and the curse rebounded. That's why I can speak Parseltongue. But my parents wouldn't promise me to him, so he didn't put the Obedience Charm on me. He tried to kill me instead."

"Extra power. I don't feel bloody extra powerful..."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe you'll find that some advanced magic you've never tried before seventh year just comes naturally to you. Who knows? And you already know how to Apparate. If you found it fairly simple to learn to do, the extra power he gave you could be a possible reason." But

then he remembered yet another thing about the Obedience Charm. "Oh, erm, there's one more thing..."

Malfoy sighed. "Something *else*?"

"Yeah. You, um — you can't cast a spell on Voldemort that will hurt him."

"And that's *good*?"

"I didn't *say* this one was good. You can't put *Avada Kedavra* on him, or *Cruciatus* or *Hara Kiri*. If there's the possibility that he could hurt himself falling if you were to stun him, you couldn't do that either."

"What do you mean, *I can't*?"

"You just can't. If you aim your wand at him and try, it will just veer off at the last minute and the spell will hit something — or someone — else. If another person is standing nearby, it could be *very* dangerous. If you were in a situation where you needed to hurt him, you'd have to do it indirectly, or without magic at all. If the spell wouldn't hurt him, you could cast something on him like the *Impediment Curse*. As long as it doesn't mean stopping him in the middle of a busy motorway with a large lorry bearing down on him. Then that probably wouldn't work either."

Malfoy stared down at the table again, then up at Harry. "Is that it?"

Harry nodded. "If my parents had agreed to do what he wanted, I'd have the same spell on me. But, like me, you do have some of his power."

Malfoy grimaced. "*You* have some of his power without the problem of not being able to hurt him and not being able to refuse an order, *and* with the ability to lie about *following* an order. Yeah. That's the same", he added sarcastically.

Mrs. Figg raised her eyebrows. "I just pulled off some very complicated magic on Muggle computers and paper records in order to get you behind the wheel of my car, and you're going to start whinging about *this*?"

"But — but —" Malfoy sputtered.

She waved her hand and Malfoy flinched, perhaps assuming that he might be the next one to lose his mouth. "No. You just have to deal with it. You're lucky Harry found out about this. Now you're forwarned and forearmed."

"The best thing to do would be to make sure Voldemort doesn't get anywhere near him."

Draco Malfoy gave him a withering look. "And winner of this year's Most Painfully Obvious Statement goes to Harry Pot —"

"Listen, Malfoy, I didn't have to say anything, did I?"

"And you still haven't said — how did you find out about this? And how long have you known?"

"That's my business. Since I can see that you're so *grateful* about it, I think I'll just go home and have my tea!"

"Fine!" Draco Malfoy spat at him.

"And I'll see you at my house for running tomorrow morning!" he said as he opened the door, still in his yelling-spitefully mode, in spite of the wild inappropriateness.

"Fine!" Malfoy responded, evidently also stuck in a rut.

Harry stalked home, his stomach churning with emotion. *He'd* have liked to be able to drive before his birthday, but now he was going to be spending his birthday in a castle on the Isle of Bute, which didn't even have any bridges connecting it to the mainland; the only access by road required ferries. He couldn't say that he was slightly jealous that Mrs. Figg wasn't breaking the law for *his* sake, so his response came out as stiff-necked objection to law-breaking in general. He ran his hand through his hair as he walked. Oh well. If he saw Draco Malfoy tooling around in Mrs. Figg's car he'd just have to make the best of it and not admit that it made him green with envy.

He walked in the kitchen door and washed his hands at the sink, then settled at his usual place for his tea. His uncle had already tucked into his bangers and mash and was reading the evening newspaper. Before he hid behind the rustling pages, Harry thought he saw a smug *smirk* on his face. As his aunt helped herself to another sausage, she looked like she had a smile hovering around the corners of her mouth which she was trying unsuccessfully to suppress.

Harry gulped down his food, looking back and forth between them every so often, but mostly attempting to pretend he wasn't paying any attention to them. To have somewhere else to look, he occupied himself reading an article in the newspaper that Vernon was holding up before his face:

Charismatic Speaker Comes to Surrey

Rodney Jeffries, the new sensation in the world of inspirational speakers and faith healers, is bringing the show to Surrey for the next fortnight. Mr. Jeffries has been taking the country by storm since last Bonfire Night, when he spoke at a gathering in Blackpool, where he convinced a young man who had inadvertently set himself ablaze for the celebration that he not only wasn't afire but talked him out of having the very burns that others had already seen on his skin! Rodney Jeffries' unique blend of inspiration and mind-over-matter has made him a sensation not to be missed! Tickets: £20.

Harry shook his head. What some people did for entertainment; twenty pounds was pretty steep, as well. He'd rather go to the cinema; he'd gone for the first time the previous summer, when he'd developed a habit of taking himself to a different film every week on one of his days off. Since Draco Malfoy was working on that day, he went alone, sitting in the dark eating Mars bars, wishing he'd thought to take Hermione to a film or two during the previous summer when she'd been staying on Privet Drive.

Now he just wished he could talk to Hermione as a friend again. He wondered how soon they'd get past the awkwardness that had resulted from their breaking up and her (sort of) getting together with Ron. He also missed Ron; since Lupin had bitten him and turned him into a werewolf, he'd been a bit distant with both him and Hermione, even though Harry had accompanied him on all of the nights that he'd been a wolf so far.

Oddly, he had the best chance of becoming good friends now with Draco Malfoy, since he was staying in Surrey again this summer. The only problem with that was the fact that Malfoy was Ginny Weasley's boyfriend, and, as much as he'd tried to talk himself out of it, Harry was completely and utterly in love with Ginny. He knew it was hopeless, but he couldn't help it. He daydreamed about her; he had dreams about her at night, as well. He'd been surprised by the nature of these dreams; they were just walking hand in hand, or she was flying on his back while he soared over the Forbidden Forest as a golden griffin. He felt incredibly peaceful after having these dreams, with only a few exceptions; sometimes, the pleasantness of the dream was interrupted by Draco

Malfoy appearing and taking her away from Harry. The really disturbing one was where Harry and Ginny had walked into one of the greenhouses and Draco Malfoy had been there, reclining on a robe on the floor with his shirt open, saying, "Thanks awfully for bringing her, Potter", as Ginny ran toward him and started kissing the blond boy passionately...

Harry shook himself as he walked up the stairs toward his room. Suddenly, a wall of rain hit the house, the drops thudding noisily off the window at the top of the stairs. Harry walked to the window and looked up into the sky, frowning; it was still a pale blue, the sun wasn't even getting ready to go down yet as it was high summer. Where the hell was all this water coming from?

Then Harry looked down; his uncle had gone outside after Harry had left the kitchen and he was aiming the garden hose at the house, spraying it as though it were burning violently. Harry could hear the water striking the roof as he walked down the corridor to his bedroom; then he heard a different sound coming from within the room. It sounded like — like it was *raining inside his room*.

He flung open the door and saw how his uncle planned to get him to repair the roof; he'd used the drill he'd brought home during lunch to drill holes in Harry's ceiling right over his bed. *That was why Aunt Petunia was covered in plaster dust*. And, he assumed, Uncle Vernon's voice had been muffled because he was probably doing all of this from the attic, making some holes above his head in the roof itself, and others in Harry's ceiling, through the floor of the attic.

Harry had been angry during his short life. He had been angry enough with Vernon's sister Marge when she had insulted his parents that he'd inflated her into a very large and unattractive balloon. He'd been angry enough with Malfoy and his goony sidekicks, Crabbe and Goyle, to put the *Furnunculus Curse* on the three of them on the Hogwarts Express after fourth year. He recalled being very angry in his other life as well, but he didn't think it was possible that he'd *ever* been angrier than he was at this moment.

He strode quickly to his desk and pulled out his wand, ready to put the *Aegis* shielding charm on his entire ceiling and the *Dessicatio* charm on his bed to dry it out. He stopped himself just in the nick of time. Two spells, just for the sake of not having a wet bedroom, might not be so easily overlooked by the Ministry. He was the new Hogwarts Head Boy.

Carving Jamie's name into his parents' gravestone was one thing, but he would be performing these spells in the house at number four, Privet Drive. It would be rather difficult to explain why he absolutely *had* to do this. (It couldn't be explained away as self-defense, for instance). He put his wand down dejectedly, watching the water cascade onto his sodden mattress, streams flowing down onto the floor via the messy sheets.

He stomped down the corridor and stairs again, then out of doors to the tap that controlled the hose, turning it off thoroughly. He looked up, seeing his uncle staring into the end of the dripping hose nozzle with confusion. Harry was tempted to turn the water on again full blast while the thing was pointing right at his uncle's face, but he resisted this urge. Instead he strode up to his uncle and crossed his arms, glaring at him.

"All right. I'll replace the ruddy roof —"

His uncle looked up at him and smiled beatifically, as though he hadn't just been attempting to drown all of Harry's earthly belongings and soak the bed in which he slept. "Splendid, splendid. I'll order the supplies —"

"— but I'm still working for Aber — I mean, Mr. Abernathy. Dick. I'll do the roof after work and on my days off."

His uncle considered this with narrowed eyes. "All right. But you just make sure it's done before you leave."

Harry agreed to get the roof done before leaving for the Isle of Bute, and then went back to his bedroom to assess the damage. His bed was hopeless, but to limit the amount of water that would get all over the house, he threw the mattress straight out the window, along with the spring. Then he hauled in the mattress and spring from the guestroom, leaving them without a place for guests to sleep should there be any. However, Harry was fairly confident that Hermione would not be turning up on his doorstep this year. Sirius was not staying with the Grangers during the holiday, as he had the previous summer, but Hermione had hinted broadly that another witch or wizard was going to be a guest and so she would have plenty of protection.

When he'd finished putting his room in order again and it only smelled slightly damp, Harry collapsed on his new mattress without benefit of sheets, exhausted, asleep almost as soon as he put his glasses on the bedstand and his head on the pillow. In one month he would be seventeen. He could make it, he told himself as he dozed off. He could. He would *not*

hex his aunt and uncle's roof so that it leaked like a sieve the next time it rained...

But then that thought caused him to fall asleep with a broad smile on his face...

* * *

He was abruptly awoken by an odd whirring noise, it felt as though he'd only been asleep for five minutes, but, judging by the sun in the east, it was already morning. When he'd been assessing damage, he'd taken some damp magical supplies out of his slightly-flooded trunk, including his Pocket Sneak-O-Scope, which he'd left on his desk. He groaned. That stupid thing again. Normally he kept it in the bottom of the trunk stuffed in one of the crazy hand-knit socks Dobby the house-elf had given him, but he'd thrown the damp socks out the window along with his mattress.

He groaned as the small metal ball continued whirring and clicking. He pulled on his running shorts and a clean shirt, tied his running shoes. What the hell was wrong with the thing? He went to the desk to examine it, glancing carelessly out the window at the milkman, who was making a delivery to a house two doors away. Except he wasn't. He had put down a plastic crate of dairy supplies and appeared to be holding a *wand*, pointing it at the door and saying something Harry couldn't hear. Without pausing for a second, he shoved the Sneak-O-Scope into the pocket of his shorts and sprinted down the steps and out the front door, racing to the neighbors' house by leaping over the intervening hedges.

In his rubber-soled shoes he'd been fairly quiet, despite the fact that to him his breathing and heartbeat were deafeningly loud. The intruder was already in the house and didn't notice that he had been seen. When Harry reached the open doorway, he held out his hand and cried, "*Expelliarmus!*" just as the ersatz milkman was turning around. The startled man flew backward and hit his head on the wall, and a framed picture next to his head crashed to the floor, the glass shattering. The wand flew neatly into Harry's hand. He stared at it. *Bollocks. What now?* The Sneak-O-Scope had stopped going mad, perhaps because the "milkman" was out cold. The wand was only seven inches, so Harry stuffed it into his sock. He ran back to his house, leaving the door to his neighbor's house open, the slumped man still on the floor, the plastic crate of dairy products growing warm on the front walk.

He picked up the telephone in the kitchen and struggled to remember Mrs. Figg's number for a moment; when he looked up and saw it on a slip of paper on the fridge door it was the first time in his life he felt like kissing his aunt. He dialed the number, tapping his toe impatiently, starting to wonder whether it would have been faster to just go to her house. At length, someone answered.

"Wha —?" came a sleepy voice too deep to be Mrs. Figg's (but not by much).

"Malfoy, is that you? Listen, I've got trouble over here. The milkman was breaking into the Nelsons' house with a wand. They're two doors away. I disarmed him and he's out cold and I've got his wand. I don't know whether the Nelsons have woken up or not and I don't know where the real milkman is. Because this obviously *isn't* really our milkman. I mean, I know what the real milkman looks like — he's called Oscar or something like that — and this one looks just like him, but *obviously* it's a wizard who's taken his place, and I need Mrs. Figg to contact the Ministry and get people over here to do memory charms or something if the Nelsons wake up and wonder what's going on and also to figure out who this wizard really is and what he's done with Otto — wait, that's his name, it's Otto — and why he's done it..."

He paused for a moment, hearing only silence on the other end. "Malfoy? Are you still there?"

"Who is this?"

"What do you mean, *who is this*? It's Harry!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, the Harry *I* know doesn't wake people up at dawn babbling incoherently about wizard milkmen..."

"Well, evidently, the Harry you know *does* do that. Listen, will you just tell Mrs. Figg to call the Ministry and to get someone over here to find out what's going on?" he practically screamed into the phone, not caring whether he might wake his aunt and uncle. "This wizard could be a Death Eater for all we know. I mean, he was breaking into a house two doors away from where I live. Maybe he thought it was my house and he was just off by two. Maybe after taking on the form of the milkman he was going to take on the form of one of the Nelsons so he'd live near me. Just *tell Mrs. Figg!*"

Before the other boy could answer, Harry slammed down the phone and went to his room, pulling his Invisibility Cloak out of his wardrobe,

where he'd hung it to dry. He put it on and examined himself in the mirror; the brief dampness hadn't hurt its effectiveness any, but it was giving off a faint odor of mildew now. He couldn't be bothered with worrying about that. He left the house again and walked to the Nelsons', the other wizard's wand still in his sock. He stepped gingerly into the house, careful not to tread on the broken glass from the framed picture that had fallen. The wizard was starting to waken, rubbing his head, so Harry pulled the wand out of his sock and pointed it through the cloak, saying, "*Stupefy!*" He had given up caring about doing magic outside of school. Let the Ministry come down on him for this, just let them try. At the very least, this man was breaking into a house, which was against Muggle laws. Never mind what he might have done that was against wizarding law.

The wait seemed interminable to Harry. He wondered why the Nelsons hadn't come downstairs when the body had struck the wall, but now he noticed that their car wasn't in the drive. They must be away. So — a fake milkman was pretending to make a delivery to an empty house. He must have known it was empty. At least the Nelsons were a worry he didn't have now...

He heard a siren in the distance, growing closer and closer, finally stopping in front of the house. Two constables from the Little Whinging police department emerged from the car and walked down the neat path to the front door. Harry withdrew into the doorway to the dining room. *Where the hell was Mrs. Figg and someone from the magical authorities?*

The constables were very similar, brown-haired young men not much older than Harry, it seemed, who had probably been up all night and were waiting to go home when this happened.

"Scott", said one of them, "where did she say the control panel is?"

The other one consulted a small notebook he withdrew from his pocket. "Um — next to the back door."

The two officers walked right toward Harry, who neatly sidestepped them so they could pass through the dining room on the way to the kitchen. He followed them. The one who wasn't Scott went to an electronic control panel with flashing lights and punched in a code he read from the same small notebook. The flashing lights stilled and both young men breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well, that'll stop the alarm bell at the monitoring station. The girl there says this lot are on holiday for the next month. Called before they

left. Silent alarm here in the house, luckily. The neighbors probably weren't disturbed. We'd better see about that bloke on the floor."

The three of them went back to examine the milkman. The officers tried to get him to come round, with no success. Harry knew that no Muggle method of rejuvenation would work. Only the *Enervate* counter-spell could waken a stunned person.

After they'd been trying for what seemed to Harry several days, they gave up. "Dunno what's wrong wif'im, Bert. Got a pulse, but not really doin' much breathin'..."

Bert picked up the hall phone and dialed. "Right. Ambulance..." He gave the address and hung up. In no time, the ambulance was pulling into the drive, and *still* neither Mrs. Figg nor Draco Malfoy had arrived, and no one from the Ministry of Magic either. The Muggles were going to take him somewhere. Harry couldn't decide whether that was good or bad. Good if Mrs. Figg or the other operatives could figure out where he was; bad if the Death Eaters figured it out first and went to retrieve him.

He watched, resigned, as they bore him outside. He slipped out the door with the police, practically tripping over the crate of milk bottles and eggs. The officers closed the door, then the one called Bert stared at it. "Family on holiday", he mused, "milkman breaks in, as though desperate to deliver his wares, he gets knocked silly and can't be brought round..."

His partner seemed less interested in actually working out what happened; he was trying to make sure they had all of their T's crossed and I's dotted. "We'll have to call the dairy. So's they know what's happened to their man. And what'll we do about the deliveries?" Scott wanted to know. Bert stared at him.

"What?"

"Well, there's all these people expecting their milk and eggs on their doorstep like always, and there's no one to do it today, is there? How are they to know what's happened? What will they think?"

Bert walked to the police car shaking his head, as though wondering how he'd been stuck with this git for a partner. "What we do is get back to our own job. It's not our look out if someone can't do theirs because they're in hospital."

"But we *should* at least call the dairy —"

"If you like. Fine. You call the dairy when we get back", he said, then stopped. "Wait", he said to his partner, clearly thinking hard. "Before they

went on holiday, they called the alarm monitoring station to say they'd be away. And is there a newspaper on the step?" Harry, along with the partner, turned to look. "No there is not. They cancelled delivery, too, I'll wager, before leaving. So — if you're going on holiday, there are certain things you do. You cancel the newspaper, you call the alarm monitoring station, if you have an alarm, and —" he said suggestively, prompting his partner. Scott looked blank, his eyes squinted as he worked very hard to think of what Bert was implying.

"Oh!" he said finally. "You cancel the milk delivery!"

Bert nodded. "Precisely. So here we have someone who *knew* they were going on holiday, but apparently not that they had an alarm system, and he thought he'd just let himself in and nick a few things while they were away..."

His partner nodded, clearly impressed by the mental prowess of the other man. "See, Bert, that's why you're gonna get that promotion. Now, me, I'd be wond'rin' who'd knocked `im out. `Specially since you'd `spect that person to hang `round, seein' as `e's a `ero."

Now Bert frowned, clearly not wanting to admit that his simple explanation of the milkman using his inside knowledge to choose an advantageous break-in time might be just a bit off. He sighed as he climbed behind the wheel. "Yes, well", he heard him say awkwardly to Scott. "Happens all the time. You got to watch who you tell these things..." Harry watched the ambulance and police car set off toward the village, worrying about the real Otto, who was now likely to be accused of breaking into the Nelsons' house. Where was Otto? he wondered. Then he had a bad feeling he knew.

The milk van was still parked near the entrance to the Nelsons' drive. Harry walked to it and took hold of the handle to the cooling compartment by grasping it through the fabric of the cloak. The door popped open abruptly, and Harry froze. The real Otto the Milkman, bound and gagged, was sitting in the back of his own van in nothing but his underwear. If he had actually been aware of his surroundings, he would have been very surprised by the door of the compartment opening itself. But Otto had been stunned, just as Harry had stunned the impostor, and no expression registered on his utterly blank face. Harry closed the door again, but not all the way — he didn't want Otto to suffocate. Who cared if the dairy products spoiled if there was a choice between that and keeping a man

alive? A man who didn't know he'd been framed for a break-in. Harry didn't dare revive him while he was in the back of his van. If he had known how to do a memory charm, that would be one thing, but he didn't. That was another thing underage wizards weren't allowed to do. Finally, he felt he couldn't wait any longer; he ran the best that he could while wearing the cloak, and when he reached Mrs. Figg's house, he pounded on the door impatiently. While he waited, he took off cloak and rolled it into a ball.

Just when he felt tempted to cast the *Alohomora* spell on the door, Malfoy flung it open. He was wearing his running clothes but still looked asleep on his feet.

"Bloody hell, Potter. I thought we were meeting at your house?"

"Bloody hell yourself. And I thought we were using first names now, *Draco*." Harry forced himself to do this; maybe it would remind him of his other life enough that he could manage to stop thinking of Draco Malfoy as the Git of the Year. "And I thought you were going to tell Mrs. Figg to send someone over to the Nelsons' house", he added grumpily, stalking into the entrance hall and then through to the kitchen. He needed a drink of water before going running.

He found Mrs. Figg up unnaturally early, pouring herself some tea. She sat and pulled a slice of toast out of the toast rack, preparing to butter it. "Good morning, Harry. Did you enjoy waking us at an ungodly hour?" was her acid greeting to him.

Harry sputtered. "Why didn't you send someone? I told Malfoy — er, Draco — that a wizard who made himself look like our milkman broke into my neighbors' house, and all I get are Muggle police and a Muggle ambulance!"

She calmly bit into her toast. "How do you know it was a Muggle ambulance?"

Harry's mouth was open; he froze, unable to answer this question, then shut his mouth again before Draco started in on more jokes about solving the bug population explosion problem. "You — you mean —"

She nodded, her mouth full. She took a swig of tea and swallowed. "Those were ours. Operatives. And the ambulance has a strong memory charm on it, so in a little while, the police who were there won't have any recollection of the milkman nor his being taken away in an ambulance. You wouldn't remember it either, if I weren't telling you about it right now, after you're out of range of the spell. It doesn't discriminate between

wizards and Muggles. I've also already seen to it that no one goes over there from the ambulance company they actually called." She looked up at him. "What? Just because I didn't do exactly as you said doesn't mean I've been sitting around idle. I don't take orders from a sixteen-year-old, thank you very much. I spoke to Albus and we worked out who to contact and what should be done. It was quick and discreet. What did you want us to do, send five Aurors in there in robes and pointed hats, waving their wands around? Or would you rather call out the dementors at times like this?"

Harry grimaced, feeling stupid. Truthfully, he'd been completely fooled. He'd had no idea it was wizards taking away the so-called milkman. He couldn't even recall their faces now, nor what the ambulance looked like... That must be the spell, he thought. Good one, that.

"So", he said, sitting at the kitchen table. "Will they question him?"

"In time. They'll take him to an infirmary we have in London and let him stew for a bit. Just answer questions related to his health, nothing about his legal status. Let him wonder. It's more likely he'll crack that way."

Harry reached down and pulled the wand out of his sock. "This is his. He was using it to break into the house. After I disarmed him I, er, used it to stun him."

She nodded, sipping her tea. "Don't worry about that. It's good we have his wand. It's evidence. And you're a witness, unfortunately, but hopefully it won't come to that. Fletcher's an excellent interrogator; gets us plenty of confessions. No one else comes close for it." Harry suppressed an involuntary shudder, trying not to think about what interrogation methods Fletcher used to achieve his success. He remembered seeing Mundungus Fletcher in his own tartan, MacGregor, at the ceilidh in Hogsmeade, and he also remembered Arthur Weasley saying that he'd inflated the damages he'd experienced at the Quidditch World Cup (if, indeed, he'd experienced any) all out of proportion. So, even though Fletcher was on their side, he obviously didn't feel that scrupulously sticking to the truth was an absolute necessity in all situations...

"The queer thing is", Harry said, "the Nelsons wouldn't normally be away at this time of year. She's usually getting ready to show her prize-winning roses right about now. They generally wait until August to go on holiday. So I wonder where they are?"

Mrs. Figg looked rather disgruntled. "Hmm. Not a good sign. I'm starting to wonder whether I should let the two of you go out running before next Monday... every time you leave your house, Harry, you're vulnerable..." She tapped her fingers on the table, thinking, before continuing to speak.

"And for your information, I knew about someone breaking into the Nelsons' before you did. Years ago Albus disguised himself as a burglar alarm salesman to go round and sell units to everyone on Privet Drive and the houses behind you as well. Much lower prices than anyone else out there. It seemed a better idea to take advantage of Muggle technology rather than having spells on every house. We have a monitoring station in an office in the village, upstairs from the stationers and across the corridor from a quite respectable solicitor. Nice girl works there during the day, Muggle. She goes in every day and sits patiently in case there are any alarms. Young man handles the evening shift, old bloke who's retired and doesn't care for sleep much anymore handles the overnight. No witches or wizards ever go near the place and all of the equipment is Muggle. There are no magical signatures anywhere. They've been told that an office elsewhere handles the billing for the monitoring fees, which is how they're paid — except it's not, of course. One reason why no one on Privet Drive has ever changed to a different alarm company is that they're never actually charged. Soon after each alarm was installed, there were problems with each of them and — as expected — each household threatened to change over to someone competent. Of course, we hastened to fix the problem and begged them not to change. 'We'll give you sixteen years free', we said, and they all bought it. Of course, there are spells on your house, various types of complicated protection spells that only Albus knows about or understands, but we needed to safeguard against someone going after one of your neighbors in order to be close to you. And now we have to work out what happened to the Nelsons..."

"How will waiting for Monday to go running make a difference?"

"Because that's Draco's birthday, and once he's of age he'll be able to take his wand with him when he goes out. He can watch your back."

Harry tried not to sputter. Draco Malfoy, *his bodyguard*. Oh, it was too humiliating. He put his hands into his pocket, miserable and glowering, and his right hand hit the Sneak-O-Scope. He took it out of his pocket and showed it to her.

"But look — I have a Pocket Sneak-O-Scope. It told me when the Nelsons' house was being broken into. We'll be fine."

She looked dubious. Harry didn't want Draco Malfoy to be his babysitter until his own birthday rolled around. He'd never hear the end of it. Especially from Draco Malfoy himself. He changed the subject subtly.

"Oh, there's another thing. The real milkman was stunned and stuffed into the back of his van. I opened the door a bit, to give him some air, but someone will have to revive him and put a memory charm on him. And the police still think *he's* the one who broke into the house, so will that memory charm on the ambulance make them forget that, so they don't give him any trouble?"

"It should. Oh, by the way — what were you thinking, leaving the house carrying your wand?"

"What? I didn't leave the house carrying my wand."

"Then how did you do the Disarming Charm?"

He shrugged. "I did it with my hand."

She stopped and stared. "You did a *Disarming Charm* without a *wand*?" Harry remembered doing this to Lucius Malfoy when he was seven, in his other life. He tried not to smile as he remembered the wand floating up around the ceiling of the study, and the furious expression Draco's father wore.

"Er, yeah. I didn't really think about it, I just did it." There was an awkward silence as Mrs. Figg regarded him with what seemed a great deal of suspicion. "Er — so someone will take care of the milkman, yeah? Revive him and make sure the police don't come after him? Give him a nice Memory Charm so he doesn't remember being stuffed in his van?"

Mrs. Figg nodded. "I'm on it", she said, draining her tea and rising. The dirty dishes flew into the sink and began to wash themselves. She calmly walked out of the kitchen without saying goodbye, and, to Harry's relief, without saying they couldn't go running.

When she was gone, Harry said, "What's the big deal? See how much wandless magic she does? Why'd she look at me that way when I said I hadn't used a wand to disarm him?"

Malfoy sighed, reminding Harry of Bert sighing over Scott. "Potter — I mean, Harry — making the dishes fly around and wash and organize themselves is one thing. They were probably charmed ahead of time and now they do what she wants them to do. And that thing where she took

away your mouth — easy trick, really. *Disarming* someone without a wand is something else. That's like —"

"— being able to do the Animagus transfiguration?" Harry said, raising one eyebrow. Malfoy grimaced.

"Yeah. Like that. I know, I know..."

"Listen, you can probably do this kind of thing too, you just haven't tried."

"You mean because of that Obedience Charm?"

"Right. Maybe after your birthday you could find out more about what you can do."

Draco Malfoy stood lost in thought, considering this. "Maybe. Could be interesting."

They left through the back door, and after stretching, started to jog toward the park. Suddenly Harry stopped dead and Draco almost tripped.

"Potter! I mean, Harry!" I mean — hell, what's wrong with you?"

"Damn!" Harry answered. "I just remembered. I promised I'd take the sodding dog with me."

Draco Malfoy raised his eyebrows. "*You* have a *dog*?"

"It's really my aunt's. We have to go back to my house and get the stupid animal."

Draco shrugged and they changed direction, heading back to Privet Drive. When they came in sight of the house, Harry noticed that the milk van was gone. He let them in the back door and Harry looked around for Dunkirk. Malfoy turned in circles, staring around the kitchen. Since Mrs. Figg wasn't technically a Muggle, Harry guessed this was the first real Muggle house Draco Malfoy had been in.

Harry strode down the corridor toward the front of the house and found the dog lying on the mat before the front door. He emitted a low growl when he saw Harry. Harry backed up for a second. Malfoy passed him and said, "Hey, now, he's not so bad." As soon as Dunkirk saw Draco Malfoy, he started wagging his tail, then he sat and looked up at him expectantly. Malfoy knelt and petted the dog, scratching behind his ears as Dunkirk put his paws on Malfoy's legs. Harry couldn't hide his surprise.

"He — he *likes* you! I don't believe it!"

Malfoy turned and made a face at him. "Hell, Harry, you don't have to be so complimentary. I don't frighten babies either."

"No, it's just — he doesn't like *anyone*, aside from Aunt Petunia. Just growls at me and Uncle Vernon. He was saying that soon he's afraid the postman will refuse to come here, as Dunkirk keeps trying to take his leg off."

Draco scratched the dog behind the ears. His tail was going like mad. Dunkirk was clearly very, very happy. Draco shrugged. "I've always got on well with dogs. It's cats I can't stand, and they can't stand me. Dogs are brilliant. Give me a dog any day."

Harry picked up Dunkirk's lead from the hall table. "Fine. *You* walk him then." Draco shrugged and took the lead from Harry, then leaned down to clip the end to Dunkirk's collar. Harry couldn't tell what he was saying as he did this, but it seemed to be sing-song endearments about what a fine dog Dunkirk was. This is just *weird*, Harry thought, and a side of Draco Malfoy that he found frankly disturbing.

"Who's there?" came a shrill voice down the stairs. Harry groaned. His aunt appeared at the top of the stairs in her dressing gown. "First it was those sirens, now —" When she saw Draco she looked suddenly flustered and her cheeks became very pink. She walked down the stairs, her left hand on the rail, her right hand going nervously to her long neck. "Who — who is *this*?" she said, her voice cracking slightly. Harry looked back and forth between them. *Oh, please*, he thought. *I just mayretch*.

"Er —" Harry didn't know what to say. Draco smiled at her in what he probably thought was a charming, dashing manner and stepped forward with his hand out.

"You must be Harry's lovely aunt", he said smoothly, taking her hand gently in his. "Was his mother very much older than you? You must have been a girl when you became an auntie."

Petunia's color had gone from pink to fuchsia. "Well, actually, I'm the older sis — I mean, yes", she fluttered. "I *was* rather a young auntie." Harry opened his eyes wide and clamped his mouth shut. *I will not say anything, I will not say anything...*

"I'm Draco Malfoy. Mrs. Figg used to be my nanny and I'm staying with her again for the summer holidays. I met Harry last year when he was also staying with Nanny Bella. My parents are having an architect do over Malfoy Manor right now, and there's plaster dust everywhere..."

She smiled broadly and batted her eyelashes. "Oh! Your nanny! Well. And Malfoy Manor, you say? Sounds lovely. Arabella never told me she

worked for such *distinguished* people." Her voice was positively breathy. Harry was no longer disturbed by Dunkirk liking Draco Malfoy. He'd sunk to a new all-time low when it came to being disturbed.

"Yes, well — we were going for a run and Harry said he promised to bring Dunkirk with us." He picked up the dog who enthusiastically licked his chin. Draco laughed. Harry made a face, but his aunt didn't notice; she didn't take her eyes from Draco Malfoy.

"He likes you!" she said rapturously. "Well, of course, you know what they say — a dog is an *excellent* judge of character", she added, with a withering sidelong glance at Harry, who had never fought harder in his life to *not* stick out his tongue.

"We really should be going", Harry said stiffly. Dunkirk turned in Draco's arms and gave him a low growl. His aunt laughed.

"Don't worry", Draco told her, without looking at Harry. "I'll be the one holding Dunkirk's lead. We'll give him a good run, down to the park and back." He put Dunkirk down and put the loop on the end of the lead around his wrist, then opened the door. Harry couldn't help a guffaw escaping him as Draco was suddenly jerked forward by the excited little dog, who was surprisingly strong. "G'bye!" he called awkwardly over his shoulder. Harry ran out the door, trying to catch up. His aunt could close the door, he reckoned. When he looked over his shoulder, though, she was watching Draco Malfoy run off with a dreamy expression on her face.

Eergh, was the only thought that came into Harry's head.

* * *

When they finally reached the park, Draco collapsed onto the grass, and Dunkirk came to him for petting. He received some lackadaisical pats on the head, but Draco was clearly too winded to bother with more. The dog had pulled the blond boy along the whole way, running enthusiastically toward the park. Draco had clearly found the pace a bit difficult, and Harry felt a bit smug; the pace felt about right to *him*. He didn't say anything about this, though, just kept up a steady pounding with his feet and ignored Draco's labored huffing and puffing.

Dunkirk sat down next to Draco, his front paws together neatly, his tongue hanging out. If Harry didn't complete detest him, he might have found the terrier rather cute. Then he noticed that the large white tent was still up. He frowned. "That's odd", he said, nodding toward the white cloth

building that rather dominated the landscape. "They haven't taken the tent down."

Draco looked now and shrugged. "Why should they?"

"Well, if you remember, there wasn't a tent permanently set up in the park last summer. I thought it was for a wedding, and that it would be gone by now."

"What, do you own the park or something?"

"No, it's just that —"

Suddenly, the Pocket Sneak-O-Scope started going mad again, vibrating against his leg and making a whirring noise. Draco frowned. "What's that?"

"It's the Sneak-O — never mind", he said quickly as a young woman came round the side of the tent, walking toward them. She was tall and slim, with long light hair and bright blue eyes that shone vividly out of her deeply tanned face. When she smiled she seemed to have more teeth than anyone else Harry had ever seen, and the legs below the hem of her very short skirt seemed abnormally long.

"Hello there!" she said, grinning. "You're up early!" She sounded either American or Australian to Harry, he couldn't decide which.

Draco brightened when he saw her, scrambling to his feet. She didn't seem sorry to see him either. *First my aunt*, he thought. *Now this girl...* He glanced at Draco Malfoy, trying to see him objectively. His shoulders had broadened and the sturdy arms protruding from his T-shirt showed part of the dragon tattoo he'd gotten the previous summer. His legs were still pale from being hidden under robes, but they were also quite sturdy. His blond hair was longish, flopping over his brow.

Now the girl turned to Harry, and she saw more appreciation there. *Well*, he thought. *At least I haven't got a girlfriend right now.* It was odd; he'd never really thought about this before. *I could go out with other girls now, if I wanted.* The trouble was, the only girl he really wanted to be with was taken. He looked sideways at Draco again, trying not to be resentful and failing.

"We were just out for a run with the dog", Draco informed her, picking up Dunkirk. She cooed at the Yorkshire terrier, who licked her hand in a friendly way. The Sneak-O-Scope continued to go mad, and Harry slipped his hand into his pocket, wrapping it around the noisy thing to muffle the sound.

It was too little too late. She looked around, frowning. "What's that sound?" Draco looked at him with his eyebrows raised.

"Umm — it's my telephone", Harry said, taking his hand out of his pocket and patting the leg of his shorts. "It'll stop eventually."

She frowned. "Aren't you going to answer it?"

He tried to look unconcerned. "Nah. I know who it is. I'll talk to them later."

She turned back to Draco. "I'm Grace. So, are you two coming tonight?"

They looked at each other in confusion. "What?" Harry responded.

"Coming to hear Rodney. We had a fabulous turnout last night. Standing room only. And the things he did!" she said rapturously. Draco looked at Harry for an explanation, but he didn't give him one.

"Er, probably not tonight", Harry answered. "But maybe before he leaves. So this is where he's been speaking?" he asked, patting the tent lightly.

"Yes. It's nice to have a familiar setting everywhere we go. I've been with the staff since last December. I was working at the American embassy in Paris, it was the dream of a lifetime, but a friend in London had me up to visit at Christmas, and we went to hear Rodney speak, and it changed my life..." She sighed and looked at Draco again, then Harry. Well, Harry thought, she's equal-opportunity. Then Harry had an idea.

"Too bad *Ginny* lives so far away, Draco", he said. "She might like to hear Rodney."

"Who's *Ginny*?" the girl asked.

"Oh — his *girlfriend*", Harry answered, looking pointedly at Draco, who was looking daggers at Harry.

"Girlfriend?" Grace looked genuinely perplexed. "Oh — so — you're not a couple?"

Draco sputtered and practically dropped the dog. "Hell no!" he cried, and Harry tried not to laugh, even as he was getting a very strong sense of déjà vu; from his other life, when he and Draco were traveling south from Scotland. He had a sudden urge to drape his arm around the other boy's shoulders and go along. Draco would want to *kill* him if he did that. He didn't dare.

"No", Harry said, "we're just friends and co-workers", he added. "I've recently broken up with my girlfriend."

The girl's wrist beeped and she checked her watch. "Oh, crud. I've got to go. Duty calls. Well, some other time, then." She started to go, then called over her shoulder to Draco, "Bring your girlfriend if you can!" before disappearing around the corner of the tent again.

As they jogged back toward Privet Drive, Draco asked Harry, "Who the hell is this Rodney?"

"Mrs. Figg gets the Muggle papers. Check yesterday's. He's an inspirational speaker of some sort. But something bothered me about the way the article described him..." He reeled off the information for Draco about the man being healed of his burns on Bonfire Day.

"So — what? You think he's really a wizard?"

"Possibly. There are some Muggles who can do mind-over-matter pretty well, but usually just for themselves. That's how you get people who are firewalkers and sleeping on beds of nails and things like that. Doing it for someone else is unheard of, as far as I know. He's going to be here for a fortnight. Perhaps — well, perhaps we can come after your birthday and you can bring your wand..."

"Why bring my wand?"

"There's a spell I want you to cast in the tent after the show is over", he said, remembering Angelina casting the *Revelatio* spell in the auditorium of the British Library after Hermione broke her cello. He could ask Mrs. Figg about any complexities he should know about before performing it. Maybe she had a book about it...

"What spell?"

"A spell for detecting recent magical signatures, whether wand magic or wandless magic. Then we'll know whether this Rodney Jeffries is a Muggle or a wizard cashing in on doing magic tricks for crowds of people. What does the Ministry think about that sort of thing? I can't imagine they'd condone it, or it would be a huge problem, if there were a slew of witches and wizards trying to make a living that way."

Draco didn't answer; Dunkirk was pulling him forward and he looked like he was straining to keep up again. Harry was hardly breaking a sweat, and he shook his head, laughing silently as he handily passed both of them.

When they finally reached the Dursley house, Draco collapsed on the lawn, red-faced. Harry took the Sneak-O-Scope out of his pocket. It was humming a tiny bit, but not very loudly, and he put it away again.

After he'd showered and dressed for work, Harry came down to eat breakfast. His aunt was pouring some tea for his uncle, who was reading the morning paper. When he said good morning to them, all he received was a grunt from his uncle, but his aunt was downright *friendly*, which was unnerving.

"So!" she said as she sat down to her own breakfast, positively glowing. "How did Dunkirk like his exercise?"

Harry took a sip of orange juice and a piece of toast from the rack. "I suppose he liked it fine", he said while he opened the marmalade jar.

"That young man staying with Mrs. Figg seems very well-bred", she said, sipping her tea daintily and turning rather pink again. Her husband remained buried behind his paper.

"Eh?" he said from its inky depths. She put down her cup on the saucer with an exasperated clatter.

"Oh, never mind", she practically snapped at him. Harry rolled his eyes. Good grief. Just what he needed in the last weeks before he could leave Privet Drive — Aunt Petunia having a mid-life crisis. Brilliant.

Suddenly there was a banging against the kitchen window and a frantic beating of wings. Without even looking, Harry recognized the sound of a post-owl trying to get to him. He dashed to the door and opened it, which was easier than the window, and the owl quickly figured it out and flew round. It landed on Harry's shoulder and he took the large creamy parchment envelope from its beak. As it flew off again, Harry turned it over, seeing the green ink and the Hogwarts seal he had been expecting. When he returned to the breakfast table, he saw that Uncle Vernon, quivering, had put his newspaper over his head, and his Aunt was clutching Dunkirk to her chest while the little dog whined piteously. Their eyes were very round. Harry thought of the eagle owls that used to deliver Draco Malfoy's sweets packages, and the ominous falcons Lucius Malfoy had employed to deliver the Death Eater recruitment letters. Dunkirk would probably have been considered a tasty snack by the large birds. Trying not to smirk, he sat, ignoring their predictable owl-terror, breaking the purple wax seal and taking the letter out of the envelope. He read it over quickly, not taking much note of the names of the new prefects (he didn't really know many people in that year) but when he was done he looked up, grinning at his aunt and uncle, saying, "Well. It's official."

They had gone back to eating their breakfasts and ignoring him.

"I said *it's official*," he repeated, very loudly and clearly.

Now his aunt looked up from her plate, muttering, "Oh, are you still here?" Her eyes went back down again.

Harry frowned. They *knew* he had a letter from Hogwarts, and they were being more beastly than usual. They wouldn't care, he knew, but he had to say it anyway.

"I'm Head Boy."

There, he'd said it. And as per usual, when he said anything concerning Hogwarts, they behaved as though he didn't exist, sometimes going so far as to say things like, *Petunia, dumpling, do you hear the wind blowing? Rather blustery and pointless, don't you think?* while she simpered and responded, *Yes, Vernon, utterly windy and useless.*

Of course, they'd spent the last fifteen-and-a-half years trying to forget he existed at all, so their present behavior was hardly surprising. He'd known since the last prefects' meeting of the year that all of the other prefects had voted unanimously for him as Head Boy and Hermione as Head Girl, but seeing it on paper made it more real, somehow. It meant that the teachers hadn't overridden the choice of the other prefects (not that that would be likely — in Harry's limited experience the teachers generally just rubber-stamped the students' choices). Well, he could tell Aberforth and Sam anyway. That would be something. He could even tell Nigel and Trevor, although of course, they would think he was Head Boy at a public school, having no idea that he was a wizard.

"Well", he said, carrying his plate and glass to the sink, giving up on them taking any notice of his Head Boy announcement. "I'm off. Dick's picking me up at Mrs. Figg's. Draco's working for him too — you know, as a lark", he added, keeping up Draco's son-of-the-lord-of-the-manor act for no particular reason except it would be too complicated to reveal the truth to them. "He doesn't *need* the money, like *I* do", he added, having succeeded for six years in keeping the secret of his gold-filled Gringott's vault. He wasn't about to let on to them *now* that he had a fairly large inheritance, mostly in solid-gold coins. He wasn't sure they actually cared how he'd afforded school for the previous six years; maybe they thought Hogwarts had taken him on as a charity case. He also knew they'd sooner stand in the middle of Trafalgar Square extolling the virtues of James and Lily Potter before they'd admit to being curious about this, if in fact they were.

Now that he wasn't talking about Hogwarts, he suddenly existed again — for a purpose. Vernon put his paper down. "Now don't think you're going to go upstairs and be a layabout as soon as you get home. I'm bringing the supplies and tools for the roof job today. You can get started after dinner. Plenty of daylight to work in still. First thing is to take off the old roof. And don't forget — after that you walk the dog again."

Harry stopped at the door. "I hope you're bringing home a rather large ladder, because the one in the potting shed isn't nearly long enough. Unless you'd like me to use my broom to *fly* up to the roof..." he added mischievously, slipping in a magic reference. His aunt and uncle both winced.

"Of course not! Don't be daft! Of course I'll bring a ladder. What do you take me for?"

Before he gave in to temptation and answered *that* question, he left, wondering whether he should suggest that he fly up under his own power, as a golden griffin, but they didn't yet know he could do this, and somehow he wasn't anxious to tell them. He walked to Mrs. Figg's house, whistling. Aberforth, looking again like his Muggle persona of Dick Abernathy, was sitting in his car with Draco beside him, waiting for Harry. After Aberforth started the car again it was only a matter of minutes before they were on the motorway heading toward the estate where they would be working for the next few weeks.

"Morning, Aber — um, Dick. I thought Sam was driving us..."

"Good morning, Harry! Change of plans. I had a few things to discuss with Arabella. I understand you've had an exciting day already?"

"Rather *too* exciting." He nodded at Draco. "So you've told him everything?"

"He has", Aberforth answered. "Arabella's going up to London to see about the fellow pretending to be your milkman. And Sirius is going to look into where the Nelsons have gone on their holiday. He's to go to the alarm monitoring office, pretending to be a supervisor from accounting, doing a spot check. We want to make sure there's been no foul play. It's possible someone simply gave them an offer they couldn't refuse." Harry looked horrified, having seen too many American police procedurals concerning the Mafia. Aberforth could see his expression in the mirror, so he hastened to add, "I just mean they might have been given the trip unexpectedly, like a prize in a contest they didn't know they'd entered. We

don't necessarily have to assume they've been hurt at this point. We'll try to track them down."

Harry nodded. He sat back, suddenly quite tired; it was hard to believe that he now had a day of work ahead of him, when it already felt like he'd been through a week of mayhem. Between the intruder at the Nelsons' and the information that Dumbledore had arranged years ago for Muggle alarm systems to be in all of his neighbors' houses to the information that the tent in the park was for the traveling show that was Rodney Jeffries, who might or might not be a wizard...

He mentioned Jeffries to Aberforth, who frowned and said, "Who? Never heard of him. But then, I don't read the papers much. Mostly gardening journals and catalogues. There are some nice gardening programs on the Muggle radio, too. And, of course, I haven't read the *Daily Prophet* for years. I suppose I'm rather out of the loop of both Muggle and wizarding news. Ask me about rose hybrids, though, and that's another story..."

"No thanks", Draco said with feeling. Harry knew he was just working for the money, not *really* being the son-of-the-lord-of-the-manor any more. He couldn't care less about actually *learning* anything during the summer. Harry frowned. He wished that he felt he could count on the Draco Malfoy in this life the same way he'd counted on the Draco in his other life, but he just felt like that was a very bad idea. He put his hand in his pocket; the Sneak-O-Scope was still humming softly...

* * *

When they arrived at the estate, Harry was glad to see Sam Bell again, and Nigel and Trevor as well. They were unloading some shrubbery with burlap-wrapped roots from the truck, already working up a sweat. Then Harry noticed a fourth person with them wearing cut-off jeans and a large, loose blue shirt and a cap with a bill turned round to the back. Then this person turned and Harry could have fallen over in shock.

"Katie!"

She smiled and gave him a hug. "Hello, Harry!" she said, grinning. Her blue shirt was unbuttoned in front, revealing a rather tight white T-shirt. She took off her cap and wiped her brow, and Harry saw now that she had her short reddish-brown hair pulled back into a small ponytail that hadn't been visible when the cap had been on backwards.

"What are you doing here?"

She reached up and patted Sam on the back. "Thought I'd spend some time with my old dad before deciding what I want to be when I grow up", she answered, grinning. Harry noticed that Trevor and Nigel were giving Katie *very* appreciative looks, which earned them a withering glare from Sam. Oh, this was going to be interesting. Then he saw that Draco Malfoy was looking at Katie as though he'd never seen her before either.

"Hello there", he said, giving her a lopsided smile. Harry frowned. All right, he thought, how many times a day am I going to have to remind him that Ginny is his girlfriend? Even though he'd thought it would be nice if Draco were more like the friend he'd had for years in his other life, he didn't want him to be like this, like the Don-Juan-of-Hogwarts. This was why he'd been so nervous about Jamie becoming his girlfriend...

But Katie was a smart girl, he remembered, and she proved it now. "So — how's Ginny?" she asked him brightly, giving Harry a merry sidelong glance. Harry resisted the urge to laugh. Unlike the American girl, Grace, Draco was now dealing with someone who knew Ginny was his girlfriend, who had lived in the same house, was at prefects' meetings with the pair of them *and* played on the same Quidditch team as Ginny.

Draco shook himself. "Who?" he said. Harry put his elbow in his ribs. "Oh! Ginny's fine, thanks", he recovered, tearing his eyes away from her legs and looking in her face now. He rubbed his ribs and glared at Harry, who was exchanging a knowing look with Katie again. They got to work moving the shrubbery, laying it out according to the plan Aberforth had placed on the bonnet of his car, the corners held down with small stones. Harry found that Katie was a no-nonsense worker, much as she had been when playing Quidditch. She wore heavy tan workboots like the others and although she sometimes showed some strain when lifting something heavy, she never complained.

The next step was digging the holes for all of the new plants, and she was a little slower than the others, but Harry remembered that he'd been the same way when he started. It wasn't because she was a girl — woman, he reminded himself — it was just that she wasn't used to the work. As the day went on, Harry was able to look at her at close range, which he never really did at Hogwarts, and he saw the physical resemblance to her father, including the way she would raise her right eyebrow when she looked like she wanted to make an acid remark about something and was restraining herself.

Aberforth had Harry and Katie working together; while Sam worked with Nigel and Draco with Trevor. This seemed deliberate to Harry. While they were eating lunch, Sam admitted this to him. Katie had gone to the large manor house with Aberforth to put some rubbish in the dust bins, and Sam leaned in to Harry, saying, "I'm glad you're here, Harry. During the Easter holiday Kate started working with us, and I thought I was going to have to lay out one or both of my mates", he said, jerking his head at Nigel and Trevor. "Couldn't keep their eyes in their heads."

Harry smiled. "The hazards of having a pretty daughter, I guess."

Sam nodded and also smiled, admitting this. "I know. But those two are a bit old for her, in my opinion. Plus", and he dropped his voice further, "they don't know I'm a wizard and she's a witch. Once, years ago, Nige saw Dick do — something — which would have given him away, but a quick memory charm took care of that, and he's been more careful since then. Me too. I don't even bring my wand to work. I'm pretty careful about it, you know? First thing I did after I got out was go to Ollivander's for a new one, and I don't take that privilege lightly." Harry nodded; he knew that was something that was very important to Sirius, too. He probably had a new wand by now.

Katie walked back toward them with Aberforth and Harry felt his spirits lift, watching her. She was one of the girls who had been placed under Imperius by Lucius Malfoy, and although she had asked him to dance at the Christmas party she'd thrown at her great-aunt's house in Hogsmeade, she'd been smitten with Lee Jordan at the time and as a result, she was somewhat more resistant to the curse's influence than the other girls had been. He remembered the previous Christmas, Lee's family trying to play matchmaker for him when they'd all been at Hog's End for the holiday. Katie had seemed a bit cut off from the Quidditch crowd after their breakup the previous year, he recalled. Lee and the twins were still inseparable, and that meant Angelina too, plus Alicia was working in the village and still saw her old crowd quite a lot. But Katie was still in school, finishing her seventh year. Harry realized that during the previous few terms he seen her for the first time spending free periods with the other students in her year. From the time in second year when she'd started playing Quidditch until her sixth year, her companions were usually her fellow Quidditch players. Sometimes that happened; a large group of friends would start to pair off, and then when a couple broke up, one of the

pair would suddenly be on the outside looking in, no longer part of the group. His heart went out to her, wondering not for the first time what would happen between him and Ron and Hermione, whether they'd ever be able to get their old comfortable friendship back after all that had happened.

When Katie was near him again, though, he just smiled at her and they went back to work. A few minutes later, Harry happened to look up and see Sam's face, it definitely seemed that Sam was smiling on the two of them. *Is he trying to be a matchmaker?* Harry wondered. If so, he wasn't sure he minded. Katie was nice and uncomplicated. He could do worse than go on a few dates with Katie, possibly feel a little like a normal teenage boy for once.

When he was lying back on the lawn sunning himself after lunch, he thought he caught Katie looking at him once, and lay back again, fighting a smile breaking out on his face. He glanced at Draco Malfoy, lying nearby with his shirt off too, but she wasn't looking at *him*. Then Harry did a double-take. Draco wasn't wearing the basilisk amulet. Harry laid back again and closed his eyes. What had he done with the pair of amulets? he wondered.

When Aberforth was driving him and Draco home, Harry felt like every bone in his body ached, his muscles unused to the hard work again. He knew that would go away, but the first day was always rather hard on him. And now he had to rip off a roof. When he mentioned this in passing to Aberforth, the old man turned to Draco and said, "We'll help you out, won't we Draco? And I'll call the lads — they'll be happy to pitch in."

"No — wait — I didn't mean —" Harry tried to say, embarrassed that Aberforth might think he was fishing for help when he was merely grouching about his uncle taking advantage of him. But by the time Aberforth had put away his telephone, it was too late. Only a few minutes after they arrived at number four, Privet Drive, Sam and Katie pulled up in Sam's old Volkswagen and Nigel and Trevor parked behind them in an ancient van which had a ghost of "Williams Plumbing and Heating" on the side in faded white lettering. Harry couldn't help a smile creeping across his face. He couldn't quite believe that after the same sort of long day of work he'd done, they were willing to come help him, all because his uncle was the cheapest person on the planet.

Uncle Vernon had already set up the ladder against the side of the house. Nigel climbed up and happened to have his face right at the bathroom window when Harry's aunt was evidently using the commode, and her scream almost sent Nigel tumbling to the ground. This brought Vernon out the back door, screaming in turn at Nigel.

"Here now, what the hell do you think you're about, peeping at my wife while she's doing private things in the privacy of her private bathroom? Never hear of privacy? And *who* the hell *are* you lot?"

Aberforth walked up to Vernon Dursley and held out his hand. "Ah! Mr. Dursley. How nice to see you again", he said, as though Harry's uncle hadn't just been yelling at them very crossly. He shook his hand while Uncle Vernon frowned at Aberforth, as though mystified about why he should know this person. Aberforth saw this. "Dick. Dick Abernathy. Abernathy Landscaping."

"Oh!" Harry's uncle responded, finally remembering. "Right, right."

"Anyway, Harry told us about his little roofing problem. Seems he has a leak right over his bed, yeah? We told him we'd pitch in. We don't mind, do we, lads?"

They answered with a chorus of *nahs* as they moved about, getting the various tools needed for ripping off the old roof. Harry smiled at Katie; she didn't seem to mind being lumped in with "the lads." Her hat was on backwards again and now her blue shirt was buttoned, which hid her body almost as effectively as a Hogwarts robe; it was possible that Vernon hadn't noticed that she was female.

Harry's uncle looked like he would have liked nothing better than to require Harry to do the job alone, but in that Harry had absolutely no experience, he looked like he also was hoping that this would mean someone who actually knew what they were doing might be working on the roof. And for free. Which was Vernon's favorite price for anything. So he held his tongue and started to go into the house.

"Oh, and guv", Trevor called to him, "We'll need a coupla stouts each fer when we're done. It's firsty work, yeah? Fanks", he called, turning back to his work. Harry wondered what Vernon would do, hearing that, and to his surprise, he returned to his car and drove away. Was he actually going to buy the stout? Harry wondered.

He didn't have long to wonder, however, for soon he was up on the roof with the others, using a crowbar to rip out the nails holding on the old

shingles. Harry shook his head over his good fortune as he worked. He worried for Katie sometimes, but she walked about on the roof calmly, not in the least afraid of heights, and he remembered some of the daredevil things she would do while playing Chaser and stopped worrying. As long as she wasn't nervous, he wouldn't worry about it.

Vernon pulled up in the car again with the stout just as they were all climbing down to the ground, the sun disappearing behind the low skyline of the village houses and the church where Dudley's funeral had been held. Vernon looked up at the roof, nodded at them all, and went into the house without a word.

Nigel and Trevor took their bottles and waved, getting into their van and driving off, and the others moved to leave as well. Draco reached for a bottle of stout, but Aberforth got there first, taking it out of his reach, his eyebrows raised. Harry bade them all goodnight and went into the house, ready for a hot shower and some food before taking Dunkirk out for his evening constitutional. He didn't care what anyone said; independence was all very well, but good friends were absolutely priceless.

* * *

Over the next few days the pattern was repeated; work all day, work on the roof as a team until it was too dark to see. It seemed ironic to Harry that they spent all day on the ground (sometimes literally *in* the ground) planting green things, and then spent the evening in the air, far from the earth. Trevor had attached a small evergreen bough he'd brought from their landscaping job and nailed it to the front gable of the house. When Vernon Dursley had demanded to know why this was, Trevor told him, "Well, we're not building a new roof, strictly speakin', but it never 'urts to do that. Appease the spririts of the wood. A little sympathetic magic. Me dad was a carpenter, always did that when he put on a new roof." Harry thought his uncle was going to explode when he heard the word "magic" and Harry ducked behind Sam.

Although the roof wasn't done yet, on Thursday, Aberforth informed Vernon that none of them would be working on the roof on Friday night. "End of the week, see? The lads want a night out, yeah?" Vernon nodded, handing him a bottle of stout, which Aberforth didn't drink, but tucked into the boot of the car. Harry understood that this made sense, but he was just a little depressed at the thought of working on the roof by himself the next evening.

Sam put his arm around Harry's shoulder then, saying, "And Harry has a date with Kate, so he can't work on it either", he said to Vernon Dursley, who opened his eyes wide, turning to look at Katie Bell. By now he was aware of the fact that Katie was "one of the lads" and also Sam's daughter.

"You're going to let *him* go out with *your daughter*?" he said incredulously, pointing at Harry and wearing the sort of expression he bore when anyone suggested he might someday vote for a member of the Labour Party.

"Certainly. Harry's a fine young man", he said, patting Harry on the back rather hard, almost making his glasses fly off. Harry pushed the frames up his nose and resisted the urge to wince. When Vernon was out of range, he turned to the older man.

"What —"

"Oh, that was just to get him off your back, so you're not up there working alone tomorrow. But as long as we're throwing it around as an idea... why not? You two don't want to hang about in a pub with a bunch of old men, do you? You're young. Go out. See a film. Have a nice dinner. Do something other than *work* for once."

Harry and Katie looked at each other uncertainly. Even if they had felt compelled to pursue each other during the summer, as their work situation offered ample opportunity for them to get to know each other better, somehow it felt strange for her *father* to be engineering everything.

"Er —" Harry said. She shrugged.

"Want to go up to London?" she asked, no-nonsense. He nodded, looking at Sam out of the corner of his eye.

"All right."

Sam pulled both of them into a hug. "My daughter's going to be going out with Harry Potter!" he declared before letting them go, walking to his car and shaking his head in wonder. Harry and Katie looked after him, each bright red.

"Sorry about that", she mumbled. Harry tried to smile at her reassuringly.

"Don't worry about it. But — this does feel a little —"

"— awkward?" He nodded. "And weird? And —"

"— I mean, we've known each other for —"

"— six years. And we've just been —"

"— friends. Acquaintances, really."

"Right."

"Right."

They stood looking at each other uneasily.

"Well, then", Katie said finally, "we'll just go out as friends. A night off. And — and we can get to know each other better. The question is — how do we keep Dad from getting his hopes up? I mean, I feel rather stupid saying this, but — I'm not really over Lee yet. I know I'm an idiot, that it's been over six months —"

Harry put his hand on her arm. "You're not an idiot. At least you *had* a relationship with Lee. I've been obsessing over a girl I wasn't even —" he started to say, then clamped his mouth shut.

"What? I thought — I thought you and Hermione —"

Harry grimaced. "I should have ended it with her months and months ago. I've been focussed on someone else for a long time now. Trouble is, she's someone else's girlfriend and there's absolutely no hope, but I can't seem to stop thinking about her anyway."

Katie sighed. "We're pathetic, in other words, both of us. Well, I suppose there's nothing for it but to go out tomorrow and commiserate with each other." She smiled at him. "I've half a mind to make Dad think things are getting very serious between us very fast, just to teach him a lesson about matchmaking..."

"Oh, no you don't", Harry said quickly, stepping away from her. "I have to work with your dad every day. I don't want him trying to kill me. We'll go out as friends and let him know in no uncertain terms that that's how it is."

Katie smiled at him. "I didn't know you couldn't take a joke, Harry. Then again, perhaps I spent too much time with the twins over the years..."

Harry laughed as she said goodbye. After work the following day, Sam got into Aberforth's car instead of Harry, while Katie drove Harry to Privet Drive so he could shower and change. When he emerged from the house in clean tan trousers and a crisp white shirt open at the neck, smelling of soap, she smiled at him.

"You clean up very nicely, Mr. Potter."

He smiled back at her, wondering whether they would *really* be going out as "just friends." It didn't take them long to reach her father's flat, on the outskirts of London, and he waited in the lounge while she did her

showering and dressing. He flipped through television channels aimlessly, then started when he heard something familiar. Going back to the channel he'd just been on, he heard a news announcer saying:

"And that's all from Little Whinging, Surrey, where Rodney Jeffries has evidently again performed what could only be called *a miracle*. There will be another opportunity to come hear Mr. Jeffries speak this evening at seven o'clock. Don't miss it!"

Standing next to the perky young dark-haired woman who'd been speaking was a handsome man who appeared to be in his late twenties. He had curling brown hair, blue eyes, a deep tan and a dazzling smile. The American girl, Grace was standing nearby, looking awed and amazed by her luck, and an elderly man was standing next to a wheelchair, which appeared to belong to him, except for the fact that he no longer seemed to need it. A commercial started then, and Harry turned off the television before the jingle that the dancing tin of fruit was singing became embedded in his brain for a month.

Soon after, Katie emerged from the corridor leading to the bedrooms and bathroom, looking fresh as a daisy. She wore her soft brown hair down on her shoulders instead of pulled back, as she did at work. Her hazel eyes shone in her work-tanned face and she wore a simple pink shirtdress that buttoned down the front with simple strappy sandals that matched her purse.

"We should be off! The film starts at nine, so we have time to have a nice meal first." Harry started to walk to the door, but Katie seemed to be moving away from it. "Where are you going, Harry?"

He frowned. "Where are *you* going?"

"To the fireplace. It's faster if we Floo to the Leaky Cauldron, and then we can just catch a taxicab to the cinema. I don't want to take the car into London proper. I'll drive you home again, don't worry."

"Oh — I didn't realize — I'm not used to just being able to Floo whenever I like."

She smiled. "Dad just had the flat added to the Network when he found out I was staying the summer. He doesn't normally like the idea of just anyone being able to come into his place."

Harry shrugged. "I suppose he has as much reason as anyone not to want too much contact with the wizarding world."

Katie looked down and away. "So you know about all that, do you?"

Harry nodded. "He told me and Draco about it last year. I'm — I'm so sorry about your mum, Katie."

She looked up again and nodded, looking brisk once more. "Well. We should be going."

They stepped into the fireplace one at a time and soon Harry found himself in the Leaky Cauldron on a Friday night. It was full of wizards getting drunk at the bar, running poor old Tom ragged. Harry winced at the noise.

"We can go eat in one of the dining rooms", Katie hollered above the racket, and Harry nodded, following her down the corridor. They entered a small dining room where two other tables were already occupied by diners. They looked up casually when Harry and Katie entered, then did a double-take when they saw the scar on his forehead, their heads swiveling now as they followed Harry's and Katie's progress across the room to the table of their choice. Harry felt himself redden. He just hoped no press were present, so this wouldn't wind up in the *Daily Prophet* or *Witch Weekly*. He wasn't even seventeen yet.

They sat and Harry turned to glare back at the rubber-neckers, who promptly pretended to have been staring at the very interesting wallpaper on the wall behind Harry's head. He and Katie picked up their menus, stifling their laughter, and when they both decided upon roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, they placed their orders with their plates, which soon after produced the food. Harry couldn't help noticing that Katie had a very healthy appetite. But then, she'd been working as hard as he had all week. And yet, her hands looked pretty and dainty and clean as they grasped her knife and fork, and he smiled when he noticed the scattered freckles the sun had brought out on her nose. She looked up and met his eye.

"Were you staring at me, Harry Potter?" she said in that straightforward way she had. He decided not to be defensive.

"Yes, Kathryn Bell, I was. Is that a problem?"

She couldn't keep up the imperious act. She blushed and went back to cutting her meat. "No", she mumbled. "It isn't."

Harry smiled. Barring the stares from the other diners, he felt so — so *normal*. He was out on a Friday night with a pretty girl whom he liked, having a nice dinner, planning to go to the cinema. He felt a bit like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

After their meal, they sat drinking tea and eating some ice cream. They still had a little time before the film started. "So", he said to her, "you still don't know what you want to do for a living?"

She sighed and shook her head. "No idea. I was actually thinking of training to be an Auror for a while, like Dad, but well... he didn't like the idea. He said I'm too young."

"My mum trained to be an Auror right out of school. Your dad worked with her, in fact."

She nodded. "I know", she said softly.

They were quiet for a while. Then Harry said, "It's okay, you know. To mention my parents. I *am* capable of talking about them. Do you — do you dislike talking about your mother?"

She looked up, startled. "Wouldn't you be if your mum did something awful and just because your dad was trying to stop her he had to give up ten years of his life? And I had to give him up too — and her. I'll never get those years back. I went through my childhood with no parents, and it shouldn't have happened. I know I shouldn't be complaining about this to you, of all people, Harry, but still — it seems dreadfully unfair..."

Harry put his hand over hers on the table. "Of *course* it's unfair. And just because I was orphaned — well, it doesn't make what happened to you and your family all right. Why can't you feel resentful about all that? If anyone has a perfect right, you do. But — remember. Your mum was under Imperius. She didn't want —" his voice caught; he thought of his own mother, her wand pointing at Ron Weasley. "She didn't want to hurt you —" He had to stop talking; his throat felt very tight.

Katie nodded. "I know", she said softly. Then she looked up and swiped at a single tear with an irritated expression. "It shouldn't be paralyzing me, it *shouldn't* be. But I keep thinking that this is a decision which will affect the rest of my life, it shouldn't be made lightly..."

"What about Quidditch? You were always a good Chaser."

She grimaced. "Not good enough. Really — if I tried out for the worst team in the league, they'd laugh me out of the stadium. Quidditch just never *mattered* enough to me. I enjoyed it and I wasn't bad for a student player, but I couldn't see doing it for a living. I mean, I'm certainly no James Potter when it comes to Chasing —"

"Don't be silly. You were a part of our winning the Quidditch Cup as much as anyone else —"

"Your dad didn't just win the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup." She looked at him shrewdly. "You — do you mean you *don't know*?"

Harry looked around, then back at her. "Know what?"

She smiled slyly. "I'll show you on the way out."

They paid their bill at the bar, and then made their way toward the door that led to Muggle London. Before they got there, however, Katie steered him to the wall where the pictures of various English Quidditch teams hung. She pointed at one which was labeled 1978. "They actually went to the World Cup, and should have won, but the Seeker had an injury and they had to go with a reserve. They had a brilliant young Chaser that year, fresh out of Hogwarts." He frowned at her merry smile, then leaned in and looked at the photograph, *really* looked.

There in the middle of the back row was his father, James Potter.

He had played Quidditch for England.

"It was apparently all over the sports pages of the *Daily Prophet* that James Potter was going to help England win the World Cup. When they didn't, everyone started talking about eighty-two, except —"

"— except my dad was killed in October of eighty-one", he said softly, watching the tall young man with the messy hair and glasses smile from the back row, jostling good-naturedly with his teammates. Katie nodded.

"He *wasn't* an unemployed bum", he said suddenly, fiercely, to the photograph, remembering Vernon's sister Marge.

"What?" Katie was very confused.

"Oh, nothing. It's just — thanks. Thanks for showing me."

She shrugged. "I can't believe you didn't know. I think everyone just assumed you did." Harry remembered then the way Hermione had stopped and stared at one of the Quidditch photographs when he'd brought her to the Leaky Cauldron after telling her she was a witch. He'd thought that she was just amazed by the people moving in the photographs; what must have caught her eye was the image of the young man who bore such a striking resemblance to Harry...

They went to the cinema and sat in the dark together while advertisements played for other films and for the sweets and other food available in the lobby, and Harry draped his hand casually on the back of her chair as they watched these things. Then, when the film started, one of the first things they saw was a young woman walking nude across the screen, far larger than life, while her boyfriend lay in bed still, evidently

used to seeing her parade around like this. Harry turned to glance at Katie surreptitiously, but she was still looking at the screen, the flickering light reflecting eerily on her skin.

As the film went on, his hand had shifted to her shoulder and somehow her head came to be resting on *his* shoulder. Cars collided, people shot one another and the naked young woman walked around her flat sensuously, sometimes partially clothed, sometimes not, usually ready to jump into bed with her boyfriend at a moment's notice...

Harry was having trouble remembering who was with the police and who was with the criminals. The American accents and slang were sometimes a little confusing. And then the young woman would walk across the screen again with nothing on, distracting him...

He looked down at Katie after one of these times and found her looking up at him. It seemed perfectly natural to lean down and brush his lips against hers. He felt an equal pressure from her. That's all they did; their mouths parted and they continued watching the film, which evidently required a large portion of Los Angeles to be blown up or burned and a number of people to be shot or stabbed.

Harry was getting tired of the film, and when a huge yawn overwhelmed him, Katie whispered to him, "We can go if you like."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. "This is getting pretty tedious." So they crept from the dark auditorium, trying not to block anyone else's view, (some people complained anyway) and soon they were back in the Leaky Cauldron stepping into the fireplace. When they emerged in Sam and Katie's flat, they found him sitting in a chair reading a book, enjoying a cup of tea and a cigarette.

"Oh, hello! You're back early. Everything all right?"

"Fine. We're both just knackered from working all day", Katie told him, kissing him on the forehead. "I'm going to drive Harry home. Shouldn't be long."

"Are you sure?"

Katie rolled her eyes at her matchmaking father. "Quite."

"Um — goodnight, Sam", Harry said awkwardly, unprepared for how uncomfortable he felt about taking his friend's daughter on a date.

When they were in the corridor, Katie slumped against the door. "Sorry about that, Harry. He's just —"

"A father whose daughter is on a date with Harry Potter. I know, I know", he answered, smiling. She grinned.

"You'd think by now he'd realize that you're just a regular person", she said, shaking her head. Although he *was* very tired, he couldn't help thinking how pretty she was as she stood there, her gleaming hair swinging around her face, and he suddenly bent down and touched her lips with his. She was caught unawares, but after a moment she relaxed and let her mouth drop open a little, running her hands up to clasp his neck. Harry was pleasantly surprised as the kiss deepened, but then he found himself reminded of something — kissing Hermione by her car in Godric's Hollow. That had been a nice kiss, like this one. Something about being with Katie felt very familiar, very safe. And yet, something was also very wrong...

He separated from her, pressing his lips to her forehead. "I'm sorry, Katie. I thought —"

"You thought you could get yourself to forget the other girl?" He nodded, ashamed. "It's all right, Harry. Do you mind — do you mind if I ask you if it's Ginny Weasley?"

His jaw dropped. "How'd you know?"

She laughed. "Well, you said it isn't Hermione, so I thought about other girls in Gryffindor — since that seemed most obvious — and Ginny's really the only logical choice. Once I thought about it, I don't know why I didn't see it before."

Harry was the one to lean against the door now. "Yeah, well, she's with Malfoy. I mean — Draco. There's no hope for me."

Katie frowned. "No hope at all? She's said so?"

"As good as. She wants to be with him. I have to get over her. It's just —"

"I know."

"— *really* difficult —"

They were both silent. Then Katie laced her fingers through his and said quietly, "Let's go."

They didn't speak in the car. Harry stared out at the night, the houses and other buildings passing by. When they'd reached Little Whinging and were going by the park, Harry saw the large white tent, looking dark and empty. The second show of the evening must be over, he thought. Then he had another thought.

"Katie", he said suddenly, "do you have your wand with you?"

"Yeah. It's in my purse. Why?"

"Can you drive back to the park? There's something I want to find out about."

She used a private drive to turn the car around and soon they were back at the park. They got out of the car and Harry started walking purposefully across the grass. Katie followed him. He stopped outside the cloth building.

"What's all this about, Harry?"

"Can I — can I use your wand? Please? It's not bad, honestly. And I'll be seventeen in a few weeks. I just need to know — something."

She frowned, but then took her wand from her purse and handed it to him. The tent entrance was zippered shut; he opened it carefully, wincing at the noise the plastic zipper made as it moved. He stepped into the tent and she started to follow, but he said to her, "You'd better stay out there, keep watch, say something if it looks like someone's coming, all right?"

"I thought you said you weren't doing anything bad!" she hissed.

"I'm not. I'm finding out whether anyone *else* is doing something bad."

"Oh, well, *that* isn't the *least* bit dangerous", she answered sarcastically. "I'm starting to feel like I might as well still be hanging out with the twins..." But she stood outside the tent, looking about nervously, while Harry entered the huge space with its army of folding chairs divided neatly by an aisle. He had been reading about this for a couple of evenings, using books he'd borrowed from Mrs. Figg, and he felt ready to try it. The worst that could happen was it not working. Of course, it would be hard to tell that apart from there simply being no hidden information to reveal, so he wasn't sure what he'd do if it *seemed* it hadn't worked...

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes, thinking about the way he felt when he was young and would do magical things accidentally, the tingling he felt all over his scalp. He opened his eyes and brandished the wand, continuing to focus on this memory, saying, "*Revelatio!*"

The spell worked instantly. Harry gasped. The previously-dark tent was suddenly aglow with ghostly pink figures. They looked like *people*, like hundreds of *different*, distinct human beings. Harry turned to the left and to the right. Everywhere, the tent vibrated and pulsed with the beautiful, shimmering and unmistakable afterglow of — *magic*.

Façade

Harry wasn't sure that he'd ever seen anything quite so beautiful. The shimmering figures pulsed and vibrated with life. He lowered Katie's wand and just stared. "Sitting", if it could be called that, in every chair, was the figure of a person who had attended Rodney Jeffries' most recent engagement, earlier in the evening. Harry looked at the dais; oddly, there were no magical signatures there, only in the audience. If Jeffries was a wizard, wouldn't there be some blue signatures? he thought. He knew from his other life that blue signatures were for wand magic, pink for wandless or accidental magic. He looked around the tent. Could everyone who had attended be a witch or wizard? Could Jeffries have made all of them perform some kind of accidental magic? What of the old man who no longer needed his wheelchair, the one Harry had seen on the television in the Bells' flat?

As stunning a sight as it was, thinking about the ramifications of what he was seeing was starting to hurt Harry's head. He jumped when he heard Katie hiss at him through the tent opening.

"*Harry!*" she said in an excited whisper. "*Someone's coming!*" She ducked into the tent nervously. "I think it might be someone who works for Jeffries."

Harry swallowed. "What do we do?" he said, thinking aloud.

Katie held out her hand and Harry put her wand into it. "I have an idea", she said tersely, not sharing her thoughts.

She stood very close to him, and when the man she'd evidently seen walking toward the tent entered and saw them, he only had time to say, "Here, now, no one should —" before she pointed her wand at him and cried:

"*Stupefy!*"

He went rigid and then lost his balance, falling over, knocking over some chairs, but not disturbing the magical signatures. Harry couldn't tell if he'd had a chance to take notice of the ghostly pink figures populating the tent. He turned to Katie.

"Um, was that your plan?"

"Not completely", she said, still sounding very businesslike. "I'm waiting for the signatures to fade."

Harry looked around. "It takes a few minutes."

"I know", she said, looking around. Then Harry saw that she was *really* looking at them. "It's quite beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes", Harry agreed. "I just wish I knew what it meant. *Who* did the magic? What spell or spells are we talking about? I thought doing this would *tell* us something, but in some ways I feel more confused than ever..."

"There!" she said triumphantly, pointing at some glowing people near them. "Fading a bit. Shouldn't be long now."

Little by little, the images became fainter, until Harry could no longer see them at all; it was as though he had blinked and they had all Apparated away. Katie motioned for Harry to help her stand up the man whom she had stunned. She pointed at the opening in the tent and Harry nodded, then helped her position the man outside the tent. The stiff figure was somewhat precarious; Harry was worried that he was going to topple over again at any moment. Katie quickly revived the man, then immediately pointed her wand at him again, saying, "*Impedimenta!*"

He looked frozen once more, although Harry knew he was merely moving very, very slowly, and that the spell would wear off in a matter of minutes. While the man was standing there, his eyes staring past them, unseeing, Katie reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out his wallet.

"What are you *doing*?" Harry demanded. She made a face at him.

"Information gathering." She found a driver's license with a London address, and some business cards with the same name on it. The cards were for a law firm in London: Shaw, Booker, Forrest and White. There was also a key in his pocket which hung from a plastic disk bearing the name and logo for *The Hare and Hounds*, a pub in the village where Jeffries and his retinue had presumably taken rooms. "Hmm", she said, staring thoughtfully at it. "Still using actual keys here. Of course, it's not an international hotel chain, so that's probably to be expected..."

"What are you talking about?"

"Many large Muggle hotels don't use keys for the rooms any more, just electronic passes. They don't even confiscate them when people leave the hotel, they just reprogram the door. I wasn't terribly surprised that I wasn't chosen to be Head Girl, since I only had seven O.W.L.s, but four of them

were in Defense Against the Dark Arts and Muggle Studies, although that's not where I learned about hotel keys. That's not in the text. For my summer homework I did a lot of research on Muggle security measures."

"I thought you were visiting relatives in America?"

"I was — that's where I learned about this; the Americans even require many people to use electronic security passes to get into their offices, much more advanced than most businesses in the British Isles. There are exceptions, of course. You wouldn't believe what — "

"I think we'd better keep moving before the spell wears off", he said quickly, not liking the look on the man's face; he definitely thought his facial expression was changing; it was changing very slowly, but changing.

Katie was squinting at one of the business cards in the dim light. "His name's Adam Justice. Isn't that perfect? He's probably been pressured to read the law all his life. Oh, wait — he's not a solicitor or a barrister. According to this he's just a clerk."

"Well, clerks can be very important to their bosses."

"Sorry; I just meant that the theory about being pressured to read the law is probably a bit off."

"Not necessarily — this just means he did the next best thing. He's probably happier, I should think. Shouldn't we —"

"*Obliviate!*" she cried suddenly, pointing her wand at Adam Justice. Then Harry noticed another figure was in the distance, heading toward them. Katie saw too, and cursed under her breath, surprising Harry.

"Back in the tent!" she hissed, and Harry found himself obeying. Adam Justice had hopefully blocked the other person's view, so they hadn't been seen, but if they made a break for the car that would no longer be true.

When they were standing in the tent, Harry threw up his hands and whispered, "Now what? Hide behind some chairs? Under the platform?"

The other person's footsteps were growing nearer, and then they heard Adam Justice start moving as well; the Impediment Curse had worn off.

"No time!" she hissed back at him. Then suddenly, she pulled his face down to hers and he stumbled; the next thing he knew, they were on the ground, her mouth attached to his still. Her hands were locked around his neck and just as her mouth opened he felt the earth vibrating very subtly as two people entered the tent. He realized what her plan was then, and threw himself into the pantomime wholeheartedly, also opening his mouth and running his hands up into her hair.

The intruders didn't say anything at first. Harry's lips had moved to her neck and she was breathing warmly into his ear when one of the two people behind them finally spoke.

"*This tent*", said a very indignant man's voice, "is the property of Rodney Jeffries, and no one is authorized to be here when tickets to hear Mr. Jeffries are not being sold. We have permission from the town council to have this tent in this location and have paid all of the appropriate fees for the use of public property; *you*, I daresay, *have not*."

Harry finally pulled his mouth away from Katie's neck. Her breathing was very shallow and her eyes looked slightly glazed-over; she was either an excellent actress or had utterly forgotten the original purpose of what they were doing.

"Oh, hello", she said brightly, as Harry helped her to a standing position. "Are we not supposed to be here?"

Adam Justice threw his hands in the air with exasperation. "That's what I just *said*."

Then Harry noticed who the other person was: Grace, the girl who'd been working at the American Embassy in Paris. "Well, hello again", Grace said, smiling at Harry. "Thought you'd broken up with your girlfriend."

He turned and smiled briefly at Katie. "New girlfriend." He turned back to Grace. "Sorry. We thought this would be, erm, more private than the car. We'll be going. Very sorry..."

Katie gave the two a lopsided grin and buttoned two open buttons on her dress. (*When had she opened them?* Harry wondered). She walked past them looking very different, to Harry's eyes, than she usually did, and he realized that she was moving her *hips* much more than usual. She obviously wanted there to be no mistake what they were up to. Normally she walked with a very focused, no-nonsense stride, he realized, although he'd never really thought about it before. Somehow, there was something very eye-catching about this new walk...

When they were back in the car, they noticed Grace and Adam zipping up the tent again and walking across the grass in the other direction to another car. When they suddenly they turned their faces toward Katie's car, she yelped and abruptly pulled Harry's face to hers. He found their mouths locked again, and then he opened his eyes and saw that hers were open, too; she was looking over his shoulder, presumably watching the other pair

until they reached their car. She didn't actually do anything with her mouth this time except keep it in contact with Harry's while she watched Grace and Adam Justice. Harry couldn't decide whether he was disappointed about this.

Finally, she pulled back from him, then put her hand up to her mouth, looking mildly horrified. "Oh, Harry — sorry about that. I didn't want them to see us looking at them. Are you all right?"

"Well, you know, it's pretty traumatic to be forced to kiss a pretty girl as a subterfuge..." he said, trying to keep a straight face, but then couldn't help smiling at her. He could see that she was blushing in the moonlight.

"You are too charming by half, Harry Potter. That will get you in trouble, you know", she said, starting the car. He leaned back and grinned at her.

"Oh, it already has. It already has."

They both laughed. As she started the car, he realized that she was probably heading for Privet Drive. "Let's go to Mrs. Figg's instead", he said. "I think we should tell her about the magical signatures we found in the tent. For one thing, we should say that you're the one who did the spell, since I'm not seventeen yet and I *did* use your wand. Plus — I just think she should know as soon as possible so she can tell Dumbledore."

"Mrs. *Who*? Dumbledore? What are you going on about, Harry?"

"Mrs. Figg. That's where Draco's staying. She was his nanny when he was small and also my babysitter when Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia wanted to do something nice with Dudley and didn't want me around. She's really a witch, and she's going to be the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher in September. She's also Mad-Eye Moody's little sister."

She didn't take her eye off the road as he told her all this, but said dryly, "You're *not* serious."

"Completely. Turn left here instead of right."

She followed his directions and they were soon at Mrs. Figg's house. When they reached the door, Harry rang the bell, hoping somehow that Draco would be the one to answer. Unfortunately, it was Mrs. Figg.

"Harry! What the hell — and who's this?"

Katie swallowed, the look on her face making it clear that she was very glad to be out of school, with no danger of having Mrs. Figg for her teacher in September. Harry saw her steel herself as she thrust out her

hand, saying in an only slightly-shaky voice, "Katie Bell. Sam Bell's my father."

Mrs. Figg took her hand and shook it firmly. "Ah. Sam Bell. Yes, yes... Come in, come in."

In the entrance hall, Harry told her, "We've been to the park, to that tent Rodney Jeffries is using. We've something important to tell you, something Dumbledore may want to know, too."

She raised her eyebrows. "And what were you two doing in the park at this time of night, may I ask?"

Katie seemed to be gaining confidence. She lifted her chin and looked her in the eye. "No", she said raising her own eyebrows at the old woman. "You may *not*."

Harry was expecting Mrs. Figg to respond with a typically Moody-like retort, but instead she chuckled and moved toward the kitchen. "I see we have a feisty one here..."

She motioned for Harry and Katie to sit at the kitchen table, then moved her finger a tiny bit, causing the tea things to start zooming around the room. "Draco should probably hear all this too", Harry told her. Mrs. Figg immediately howled Draco's name, making Harry and Katie wince (Harry fought the urge to cover his ears).

"*WHAT?*" came the annoyed response from the second floor.

"*JUST GET YOUR ARSE DOWN HERE!*" was Mrs. Figg's answer. Harry glanced at Katie; he had become accustomed to this from having stayed in this house during the previous summer, but he was a bit embarrassed to have Katie witness the usual mode of communication for the Figg household: top-of-the-lungs bellowing. Katie, however, only winced the one time.

"*I'M COMING, YOU OLD —*"

By the time he was entering the kitchen, all of the tea things were laid out on the small table. Draco stopped short when he saw Katie.

"Oh, hello", he said, suddenly attempting to turn on the charm, smirking and looking her up and down pointedly. "Don't *you* look different..."

Harry pretended to swat at him. "Sit down and put your eyes in your head. She's my date tonight."

Draco Malfoy sat in the empty chair, laughing. "Some date, Potter. Giving her a tour of Figg's kitchen. You really know how to show a girl a

good time." This time Harry wasn't pretending about the swatting. "Hey!" Draco yelled, holding his arm.

"That's enough, the pair of you, or I'll start telling the girl about how I changed both your nappies", Mrs. Figg threatened. The boys clamped their mouths shut and Katie did too, but in her case, she seemed to be suppressing laughter.

"If you're on a date, what are you doing *here*?" Draco asked them as he poured the tea. He looked disgruntled about the fact that *he* wasn't out and about on a Friday night.

Harry explained to them that they'd stopped by the park on the way back to Little Whinging and Katie (they said) had cast the *Revelatio* spell. He told them what they'd seen — but not that they'd *been* seen by Muggles (at least, for the time being, he was assuming they were Muggles).

Mrs. Figg had a very strange look on her face when she'd heard why they'd come to her. She stood and started pacing. Then Harry said, "Mrs. Figg — can I tell Katie about the — people working for — um, You-Know-Who — no! Wait! I don't mean Voldemort. I mean —"

"You mean Dumbledore", Mrs. Figg nodded. "You mean about the operatives." She sat again and nodded at Katie, actually patting her hand affectionately. "I daresay she's a good girl. Trained your dad, I did, when he was fresh out of school. Excellent Auror. Such a shame what happened..." She patted Katie's hand again and smiled sympathetically at her. Katie acknowledged this silently with a small smile.

Once Katie understood that Sirius Black had been working as an operative before he'd been cleared, and that Remus Lupin and Severus Snape were also operatives, they brought her up to speed concerning the milkman who wasn't.

"Do you think Jeffries is connected to the milkman?" Harry asked Mrs. Figg. "And have they found out who he is?"

Mrs. Figg looked very disturbed. "We already suspected there was something funny about Jeffries, but it's not what you think, Harry. And I do think there's a connection with the milkman — but not for the reasons you might assume..." She trailed off, frowning into her teacup. "We're still trying to work out some problematic things concerning the milkman..."

"Like what?" Harry wanted to know.

"Well — like the fact that he's not a wizard. He's a Muggle."

"I know Otto's a Muggle. Of course he is."

"I don't mean the real milkman. I mean the fellow you disarmed, Harry. He's a Muggle."

"But — but he was using a wand to get into the house —"

"Was he? Are you certain?"

Harry's head was spinning. "I don't understand — he *was* breaking and entering, wasn't he? And the Nelsons were away when they normally wouldn't have been —"

"Actually, it turns out that Mrs. Nelson's neice had a baby and she and her husband flew to Florida to spend a fortnight visiting. I severely doubt that someone *forced* a young woman in America to give birth to a child and then arranged for her aunt and uncle to fly to America to visit her just so they could break into their house and be two doors away from you."

"Well — they may not have done it because of that, but they may have taken advantage of the fact that the Nelsons were gone for a little while..."

Mrs. Figg sighed. "And then there's Jeffries."

Harry sat up. "Yes?"

"No wand magic. No accidental magic. Absolutely nothing goes on in the hotel rooms where he stays, either. No magical signatures of any kind. His staff all seem to be Muggles, too. If he himself is a wizard, he's not doing magic."

"But — but we saw the signatures."

"Right. *He* doesn't seem to be doing magic. But the people who come to see him —"

"How could his entire audience have been witches and wizards? It just seems so unlikely —"

"They're not. They're Muggles."

"Huh?"

She sighed. "Exactly, Harry. That's what we're trying to figure out. And I *do* think that your Muggle milkman imposter used that wand to break into the Nelsons' house. The question is — how? Did someone teach him the spell? Where did he get the wand? It's a good one, chestnut and dragon heartstring. And how did he manage to get it to perform magic?"

Harry frowned. None of this was making sense. Muggles performing magic?

"So —"

"So we have been paying very close attention to Mr. Jeffries since last November and we are as mystified about him as you are right now."

"Well, I'd also like to know how he *just happens* to be in Little Whinging just as I *happen* to be starting my holiday..."

"Harry, trust me when I say that the Ministry is very concerned about Jeffries in general, and that the operatives are specifically interested in the fact that he is in Little Whinging and interested in working out your milkman imposter problem. Plenty of highly qualified people are on the job, Harry, and you should go home and get some sleep and let others *do* their jobs. Your job is to be a teenage boy home from school for the holidays."

Harry frowned; he felt so *useless*. This was *very* frustrating after being the captain of the Dueling Club, leading the other club members into battle in the forest...

Katie was standing. "Mrs. Figg is right, Harry. I'll drive you home. You've got a day off tomorrow. Relax and do nothing. We've all been working hard this week."

He couldn't argue with that; while he was getting more used to it now, after the first few days of working for Aberforth again he'd had muscles aching that he'd forgotten he possessed. A day or two of rest sounded wonderful. Whether he could stop worrying was another story.

They said goodnight and left — although Harry noticed Draco Malfoy ogling Katie's legs again as they departed. When they were in the car once more, Harry simply stared out the window while she drove the short distance from Mrs. Figg's house to Privet Drive; he spoke only to give her cursory directions.

When they pulled up in front of number four, Harry turned to her. "You know, you really were good back at the park."

In the illumination from the street lamps he could see her blush. "A good kisser? Or —"

Now Harry was the one blushing. "Well, that too. But — I meant your response to that — that Adam Justice. You made sure he wouldn't remember the magical signatures, and you came up with a plausible reason for our being in the tent..."

She shrugged, her hands still on the steering wheel. "It was nothing."

They were silent, both staring out the front window of the car. When Harry finally spoke, Katie seemed startled. "You know why you can't figure out what to do for a living?"

She turned her head, frowning. "I have a feeling you're going to tell me."

"It's because you already know what you want to do, but you've promised your dad you won't."

She looked down at her hands, her mouth very thin. "Yes", she sighed. "You're right, Harry. The only thing I've ever seriously considered doing is being an Auror. Defense Against the Dark Arts was my favorite class in school. Any time I paid any attention in any other class it was only if it was something I could use against dark wizards. I'm not the fastest dueler in the world, but I can usually figure out a way not to be in a position where I *have* to be dueling someone, which is probably wiser, really. That's why I didn't join the Dueling Club. And I found History of Magic and Potions to be *unbelievably* dull. Transfiguration wasn't bad — I actually had two O.W.L.s in that one. And I had one in Divination. Beginner level. Beyond that I lost interest. And Astronomy — well I don't even want to *think* about that..."

She looked up at the sky. "If you asked me what part of the sky to look in for Orion's Belt or Sagittarius, I'd have no idea, but if you want me to follow someone through Diagon Alley without their knowing they're being followed, I'm the one for the job."

He grinned. "Why'd you say that?"

She ducked her head. "Because before Lee and I were going out, I saw him in Diagon Alley shopping for school supplies during the summer and I followed him because the twins had told me he had a girlfriend and I wanted to see if he was going to meet her. Turned out they'd been lying to me; they knew I fancied him and they were trying to get us together. Sneaks. But Lee never suspected I was following him. People can be really daft, you know?"

He smiled at her. "So you know I'm right." It wasn't a question. "When the time comes — what are you going to tell your dad?"

She sighed and leaned back with her eyes closed. "I don't know. I suppose that's what I'm really doing here this summer. Trying to get dad to see that I really am an adult, that I can make these decisions for myself. Spend a little more time with him before he disowns me..." She turned, and on seeing Harry's frown, she gave a feeble smile. "Joking. I know he wouldn't do that. But — *oh, Harry*. The way he goes *on*, sometimes. Did you know that his *best friends* arrested him? Not your mum — she was on

holiday. And these so-called 'friends' treated him like any other criminal. I know, I know, technically they should have. But — but he was *one of them*. And he was protecting *me*. The way they suddenly didn't seem to think he was the same person, the way they took him away — that's something he's still not gotten over. Not that he's gotten over Mum; even after sixteen years. I just wish... I wish he could be happy. The only time he seems happy is when he's working, but I think that's just a distraction. And he won't talk about prison; I've tried asking him. The only thing he's said about it was that if he'd known what he was sending people to, he might not have been such a good Auror. And now I'm supposed to tell him that's what I want to do with my life?"

Harry put his hand over hers. "Most of the people in Azkaban really deserve to be there. It's true that there need to be some changes in wizarding law, so we're not punishing people who are defending others, but that's a problem with the law, not with the people enforcing it."

She grasped Harry's hand. Her voice had become very soft. "All those years when dad was in prison, I thought of his being an Auror, and how I would make him proud of me, how I would be just like him when I grew up. I played at being an Auror with my friends and for a while I tried to get them to call me 'Aurora', since I hated the name Katie..."

"I rather like the name Katie", he said quietly. Suddenly he realized that they were sitting very close together, their faces only inches away. They looked at each other for what seemed a very long time.

"Do you want to go to Kew Gardens?" Katie asked suddenly, in a strangled sort of voice. Harry backed up and cleared his throat, taking his hand from hers.

"Um — all right. I've never been."

"We — we could go tomorrow."

"What happened to relaxing tomorrow?"

"Kew *is* relaxing. It's one of my favorite places in the world. After — after Dad came home, it's the first place he took me. We've been gardening all week — we can enjoy the fruits of someone else's labors for once."

She smiled at him, although it looked a bit forced, and he nodded. "When?"

"I can pick you up at ten-thirty. We can have lunch in London."

"All right then." He opened his car door and was mildly surprised to hear her open hers and follow him to the front door.

"Goodnight, Harry. Except for the people gawping at us in the Leaky Cauldron, the horrid film and meeting your Mrs. Figg and having to see Draco Malfoy again it was the perfect date", she said with a mischievous look in her eye.

Harry winced. "That's just about everything. What's left?"

"I think just — this —" she said, standing on her toes and brushing her lips against his. He reached for her shoulders and held her in place before him, barely needing to touch her, preventing her from leaving him immediately, so he could kiss her properly. She didn't complain but behaved rather as though she'd been hoping he would do this. He shivered in the night air; her fingers were brushing his bare forearms lightly, making the hairs there stand on end. Their bodies didn't quite touch; he was aware of her being very near, but she wasn't pressed against him. They seemed to stay like that for rather a long time. When he finally pulled his face back from hers she had a look in her eyes he'd seen before. He'd *definitely* seen both Ginny and Hermione look at him that way when they'd been snogging, as well as Cho, for that matter...

"Good night, Harry", she said so softly he had to strain to hear the words, then she turned and walked back to the car. While she started the engine and prepared to move off, he raised his hand, and she nodded back at him with a small, secret smile. He went into the house and leaned on the closed door, hoping his aunt and uncle weren't waiting up, hoping they wouldn't say anything to him about Sam "letting" his daughter go out with him. He closed his eyes, smiling to himself as he remembered the long, slow, leisurely end-of-date kiss. Unbidden, then, the image of Ginny in the greenhouse with Draco crept into his mind, and he had to abruptly open his eyes to banish it. *Katie*, he told himself. *Think about Katie*. She wasn't someone else's girlfriend, and she wasn't in love with his best friend and his best friend wasn't in love with her. He hadn't done anything to lead to the death of her last boyfriend. For once in his life, maybe he could feel almost-normal and go out on a few dates with a perfectly nice, perfectly normal girl.

For once.

As he strode up the stairs two at a time, he couldn't help smiling to himself. If his aunt and uncle ever found out she was a witch, not to mention Sam and "Dick" being wizards, they wouldn't think she was so "normal" any more.

She wasn't in love with his best friend...

Suddenly, having been able to talk so easily to Katie, he realized how much he missed Hermione. Still with a calm, contented feeling filling him from the date, and putting Rodney Jeffries and the milkman out of his mind, he sat at his desk and pulled out a piece of parchment. He found his favorite eagle quill that Hermione had given him and the ink that changed colors as you wrote; he'd bought it on his very first shopping trip to Diagon Alley with Hagrid, when he was eleven but he didn't use it very often, so there was plenty.

Dear Hermione,

I'm sorry I didn't write sooner to officially congratulate you on becoming Head Girl! Everyone knew for years you would be, of course, so it's a good thing you didn't disappoint anyone!

He stopped and flicked the feathery part of the quill over his chin as he thought. He couldn't write a letter that was punctuated by nothing but exclamation marks. It sounded like false laughter or something. He thought for a few minutes before continuing writing.

I also wanted to write to you to tell you something that should probably come from me, instead of someone else. I went on a date tonight with Katie Bell. I know this comes out of the blue, but it seems to be just what I needed. It was actually her dad's idea, but Katie's very nice and we had a nice time —

Erg. He was going to wind up using the word "nice" to describe everything at this rate. He scribbled out the end of the sentence and wrote, "good time."

I know you were hacked off at me for breaking up with you, but I still think I did the right thing. Have you written to Ron? How are the two of you getting on? Please don't be too cross with him; he has a lot

to deal with right now. Not that you're cross a lot. I'm not putting this very well...

He thought for a very long time before continuing.

You're my two best friends and I want you to be happy. Please forgive me for being such a prat and handling things so badly. I love you both very much and you both mean the world to me.

He was unsure about including the last part, but before he could lose his nerve, he signed it and tied it to Hedwig's leg. He watched her fly into the night, silhouetted against the moon for a moment before swerving and disappearing in a stand of pines. Then he thought she was coming back. Already? he thought. But although he could tell that a small flying object was heading toward him, it never seemed to grow larger. When the object practically zoomed into his forehead, threatening to replace his old scar with a larger, messier one, he ducked and saw Ron Weasley's owl, Pigwidgeon, flapping around the room excitedly, like a flying, fuzzy, tennis ball on too much caffeine.

He watched it for a while, waiting for it to tire out, but Pig's enthusiasm for his work was boundless, and finally, Harry gave up and used an old butterfly net that had been in the room when he'd moved in to snag the little bird. He took the note off its leg while it continued to jump about excitedly and discovered that there were actually two notes; one in Ron's handwriting and one in Ginny's.

He swallowed. *Ginny*. Damn. Why couldn't he just have gone to bed? Why did he have to sit down and write to Hermione? Of course, that wouldn't have kept Ron from sending Pig with the letters. He opened Ron's letter first, hoping for a little sanity.

Dear Harry,

Congrats on being Head Boy. No surprise there, of course.

You haven't wasted much time, have you? But you better hope Hermione doesn't have that Prophet subscription any more. You know

she hates finding out about things that way.

Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that later this month, Remus Lupin and I are going down to London to try that dungeon thing the Ministry has for werewolves who want to be locked away safely. And before we go, Snape's going to be using the fireplace to give us potion every day for a week. (Lupin's back in Manchester most of the time, but he's come here a couple of times to do some training with me. We'll probably do that twice a week.) It's possible I could stay here for the full moon, since I'll have the potion, but somehow I just don't want anyone at home to see me that way, especially Mum.

Sirius wrote to me and said that I'm invited to spend August with you at Ascog Castle, so I'll be there for the next full moon. He's invited Lupin too, so you and Sirius can keep us company again. And Snape can still get the potion to us. You know Sirius told Lupin he might even invite Snape to stay as well? Dunoon isn't that far from Bute. Did you ever think Sirius Black would invite Snape to his home? I had to ask Mum to pinch me after I read Lupin's letter (Lupin told me, not Sirius). Unfortunately, the twins were visiting Mum and Dad, so they straightaway put a pinching hex on me and my bum was black and blue in seconds. I miss the buggers sometimes.

Ginny's sending a letter too. I think it's about Draco Malfoy's birthday. Just imagine me making retching noises right now and you'll understand how I feel about that. Now she's hit me (she's reading over my shoulder). I have to go now. I have a little sister who needs throttling. See you soon.

— Ron

His signature was somewhat distorted, as though he'd already started scuffling with Ginny. Harry smiled, remembering good-natured squabbling and wrestling with Jamie and the twins. Putting a pinching hex on someone who said, "Pinch me, I think I'm dreaming", was *exactly* the sort of thing Simon and Stuart Snape would have done.

Then he looked at the other piece of rolled-up parchment. So, Ginny was writing him a letter. He unrolled it slowly and then read:

Dear Harry,

Draco tells me the landscaping work is going well so far and that Katie Bell is also working with you. You both already get on well with her dad, so that's nice. When Draco wrote to me last summer he told me that the two of you had become good friends with him.

I'm writing to ask you for your help in planning a birthday party for Draco. I've already written to Mrs. Figg, and she's arranging most of the details, but we need some way to keep him away from the house on Monday (his birthday) so he won't know what's happening. The trouble is, he asked off from work, so he won't be with you. I don't have a clue what to do. You're coming to the party, too, I hope? Tell Katie and her dad that they're also invited. Draco didn't have a party on his birthday last year, and he's turning seventeen now, so he'll be of-age. I want it have a proper party for him. Let me know what ideas you might have.

Love,

Ginny

Harry stared into space for a moment. He could think of plenty of places he'd like to send Draco Malfoy, none of them particularly nice. Then he tried to think of something he could actually tell Ginny. Finally, he pulled out a piece of parchment and wrote:

Dear Ginny,

I went to the cinema with Katie Bell tonight. Have you ever been to a Muggle cinema? If you choose a better film than we did you might actually like it. Ha ha. Of course, Malfoy may not have been to a film either, in which case you'll need someone with you who knows what to do. So I was thinking you could ask Hermione and Ron to come along, so Hermione can act as your Muggle guide and Ron won't complain about the two of you being out alone together (and Hermione might be able to distract him so you can forget you're not really alone and you might actually get some privacy).

Tomorrow Katie and I are going to Kew Gardens. If the film you go to see on Monday isn't long enough, perhaps you can do something

like that, or just wander around Diagon Alley for as long as you need to in order to let Mrs. Figg get the house ready. Sam and Aberforth and Katie and I can come after work. Maybe while we're in London tomorrow Katie and I can get him a gift. Do you have any ideas?

*Love,
Harry*

Harry went back and scribbled out the "ha ha." *How stupid*, he thought. After that he scribbled out "Malfoy" and wrote "Draco." Then he worried that mentioning Ron and Hermione would make it sound like *he* was the one who didn't want Draco and Ginny to be alone in London together. Then there was the casual way he'd mentioned Katie. Would she think he was trying to make her jealous? (*Was he trying to make her jealous?* he wondered.) If he *didn't* mention Katie, would she think he was trying to keep it from her when she found out? *It's just been one date*, he thought irritably. They liked each other and so far they seemed to get on well together. He didn't have some pre-existing best friend or sister-of-best friend relationship to muck up by going out with her. (Although he did have a daughter-of-co-worker relationship — a co-worker who was doubling as a matchmaker.)

Suddenly he understood the appeal of Parvati for Ron. Katie was uncomplicated for him, as Parvati had been uncomplicated for Ron. It was a relief, really. He wasn't sure it would really stop him completely from thinking about Ginny (being with Parvati had clearly not taken Ron's mind off Hermione) but it was worth a try.

He set aside Ginny's letter and wrote a brief note to Ron:

Dear Ron,

Thanks for the letter. Sorry I didn't write much this week. I'm knackered from work and also rambling around on the roof of our house in the early evenings. Don't ask. I'll explain when I see you.

I'm not sure what you mean about wasting time. And what are you expecting Hermione to read in the paper? She knows she's Head Girl and I'm Head Boy. Do they usually put that kind of thing in the Prophet?

I hope the dungeons at the Ministry aren't too bad. I understand you not wanting your mum to see you. I'm glad you're coming to Scotland in August! I really wanted to be there for you during this full moon, but at least you'll be with Lupin. You know, I think I might need to get Aunt Petunia to pinch me too. (She'd be very happy to.) Sirius is inviting Snape to Ascog? Maybe we can go up to Dunoon for a day, get Snape to give us a tour. Dunoon's a nice place, and the Firth of Clyde is great. His uncle has a sailboat and Snape knows how to use it. A cloudy day would probably be best so he doesn't have a problem with the sun.

I suggested to Ginny how she might get Draco Malfoy out of Mrs. Figg's house during the day on Monday so he won't see her getting the place ready for his birthday party. I said the two of them could go up to London and see a film. Don't scream at me! I also said that they could take you and Hermione along, which means you could keep an eye on them and Hermione could be a Muggle guide for the three of you. (Have you ever been to the cinema?) Then you and Hermione could both come to the party afterward as well and keep me company. I need some other friendly faces there; I just cannot handle the idea of celebrating that git's birthday (insert retching sounds here) without the pair of you to talk to.

Don't throttle Ginny. Be nice to your sister. You can't be too careful. Remember — she's learned a lot from the twins and she's one of the top duelers in the club. (Do you want your bum to turn black and blue again?)

By the way, I'm going to start working on finding those people we talked about. I hope I'll be able to tell you more soon.

— Harry

Harry tied both letters to Pigwidgeon's leg, gave him an owl treat, and watched him fly off again. He climbed into bed thinking about how he might go about finding the missing Weasley sisters in this life, but before he could come up with a plan, he was fast asleep.

* * *

In the morning, he met Draco at Mrs. Figg's, Dunkirk in tow. When he returned home from running he noticed a letter from Ginny had been left

on his desk by Pigwidgeon. He showered and dressed, stuffed the letter in his pocket without reading it, and waited for Katie. She drove up right on time and he strode to the car, smiling. When he got in, she said, "Oh!" suddenly and pulled a newspaper off the dashboard, throwing it quickly into the backseat.

"That's okay", he said. "Uncle Vernon doesn't really keep his car nice and Aunt Petunia's always nagging him about it. She's pretty compulsive."

"Um — right", she said, blushing for no reason Harry could figure out. She started the car without saying anything else.

After driving in uncomfortable silence for a while, Harry said, "While we're in London, can we stop in Diagon Alley?"

She looked startled. "Oh, um — I thought we'd avoid wizarding London today. That's why I borrowed the car from Dad, so we wouldn't have to Floo to the Leaky Cauldron."

"Are you sure we couldn't just make a quick stop there? I need to get Draco Malfoy a birthday gift. By the way, you and your dad are invited to his birthday party. It's to be at Mrs. Figg's on Monday night."

Katie turned her head slightly. "You're celebrating the birthday of the boyfriend of the girl you're crushing on?"

He grimaced. "I'm not — oh bother. I'm trying to be big about all this. Get Ginny out of my mind. Treat him like a human instead of a flesh-eating slug, which is my first impulse, frankly. So I'm going to get him a birthday present and go to his party and smile and be nice even if it kills me. Which it might." He gave her a lopsided smile.

"Well — maybe I can help you put Ginny out of your mind." Her tone of voice was light, but Harry took a good look at her now. She was wearing a blue skirt and white blouse. Her arms looked very tan from her work outdoors and her legs looked —

He turned and faced the road, trying not to think about her legs. He had a feeling he knew now how she was going to try to get him to put Ginny out of his mind. He remembered the two of them at the front door the previous night. *Katie is uncomplicated*, he reminded himself. Then why did he have the sudden nagging feeling that he was cheating on Ginny?

He found that Kew Gardens *was* a wonderfully relaxing place. There were fountains and waterfalls and marvelous plants and a generally peaceful atmosphere. He found himself wanting to talk to Katie about his other life, about Jamie, but he didn't quite know how to bring it up without

her thinking he was barking mad. So he sat with her on benches and walked holding her hand through leafy arbors and once, in the shadow of a huge old chestnut tree, he kissed her again. While he kissed her, he thought that maybe he could show her some things in the Pensieve and then she might not think he was insane. But, he realized, he probably shouldn't show her something like his initial meeting with Maggie Parrish, which only came about because of his years of experience with stalking Ginny...

Maggie Parrish.

He stopped kissing her abruptly. She looked up at him and gave him a small smile, then stopped when she saw the look on his face. "Is everything all right, Harry?"

"Um — yeah. I just — I just had an idea for how to do something — I mean, for how Ron can do something. I want to make sure I don't forget it before I can put it in a letter to him."

She grinned. "I'm glad kissing me can be so inspirational, but weren't we trying to get you to stop thinking about a Weasley?"

He grinned back mischievously. "Well, it's a different Weasley, anyway." She swatted him playfully and they walked on, laughing. He finally looked at Ginny's note while they drove to the Leaky Cauldron, so they could get to Diagon Alley. Frowning while he read, he decided not to get Draco the all-too-practical school items she'd suggested. *That* wasn't a seventeenth birthday present. Instead, he picked out a new broom for him, and told Katie that she and her father could go in on it with him. If Ron and Hermione also wanted to contribute, he thought, then it wouldn't amount to as much for each person. He thought she was looking rather twitchy and nervous when they were in *Quality Quidditch Supplies*. She kept looking around at the other people in the shop and then away again, as though she were trying to make it look like she wasn't looking at them at all.

When they were back on Privet Drive saying goodbye, Harry kissed her without hesitating this time, holding her against him, feeling her warmth and life, the contours of her body. *Do it right*, he told himself sternly. *She's a nice girl. Don't daydream about Ginny all the time. Enough's enough.*

But once she was gone he raced up to his room; he had an idea for how to go about finding one of Ron's older sisters and he wanted to see whether it would work. He took out his Pensieve and put it on his desk. He locked

the door to his room, but just as he was getting out his wand, Hedwig came soaring in the window with a reply from Hermione. She dropped it on his desk and landed on top of her cage and began preening. Harry unrolled the letter and began to read.

I hope you are having a ripping good time with your new girlfriend, Katie Bell. Ron and I are going to London with Draco Malfoy and Ginny on Monday to see a film before we come to his birthday party. I suppose we'll see you there.

— *Hermione*

It was extremely terse and, he thought, rather snippy as well. What was her problem? He looked at the note again; he couldn't remember *ever* getting a letter from Hermione that wasn't signed, "*Love from Hermione*." No love was being sent *this* time.

Then he saw that a newspaper clipping had fallen out of the parchment. Uh-oh; now he saw what her problem was; she had sent him a page from the "People" section of last night's *Evening Prophet*, the late edition, which had a story about him and Katie going out and a picture of the two of them eating dinner; Harry was leaning over and kissing her at the table, it seemed. Under the table, her foot was snaking out of her sandal and toward his, without quite making contact. *I didn't kiss her at dinner*, he thought. Maybe that was when I was whispering to her about the people looking at my scar. And if her foot really was doing that, *I* was certainly not aware of it...

He wondered who'd taken the picture. He hadn't noticed a camera. He knew that modern Muggle cameras could be very small and unobtrusive. Perhaps there was a wizarding equivalent (or someone had simply taken the photo with a Muggle camera and developed the film the wizarding way). Then he sat down with a thump as he read the story. *Oh, this just keeps getting worse*, he thought.

CHASER CATCHES SEEKER
by *Daisy Furuncle*

Former Gryffindor prefect and Chaser Kathryn Bell was seen dining at the Leaky Cauldron this evening with none other than Gryffindor Seeker and newly-minted Head Boy, Harry Potter. Bell and Potter dined very cozily in a secluded corner of a private dining room, away from prying eyes. Potter has apparently parted ways with new Head Girl, Hermione Granger, also of Gryffindor, who has evidently been his paramour since before the Triwizard Tournament, although they only owned up to their secret relationship in June of last year. During the Tournament, Miss Granger was linked romantically both to Potter and to the late Bulgarian Seeker Viktor Krum, who died in suspicious circumstances in the forest at Hogwarts just over a month ago. Potter was seen bent over Krum's dead body; Krum had been seeing another cast-off girlfriend of Potter's, the former Head Girl and Ravenclaw Seeker, Cho Chang. Potter started seeing Chang not long after her previous boyfriend, Hufflepuff Seeker and Triwizard champion Cedric Diggory, died in Potter's presence under still more suspicious circumstances.

During the summer holiday, Bell and Potter are both working for a landscaping concern owned by Albus Dumbledore's brother, Aberforth (who has had legal problems of his own in the past), along with Bell's father, convicted killer Sam Bell, and Draco Malfoy, Slytherin prefect and son of convicted Death Eater Lucius Malfoy. Sam Bell has earned his living doing this work ever since he was released from Azkaban, and Potter and Miss Bell are evidently doing it on a lark, but young Malfoy reportedly needs the money very badly, his finances having been in dire straits ever since his mother disowned him for conspiring with Potter and Granger to send his father to Azkaban.

Bell, Chang, Granger and Alicia Spinnet (another former Head Girl) are the four girls whom Lucius Malfoy had allegedly placed under Imperius, part of the basis for his life sentence. All of the girls were ordered to pursue Potter romantically while under the curse, which would explain how the very pretty Miss Chang in particular came to be his girlfriend for a time (it was certainly convenient for Potter that her boyfriend happened to be killed). Has your curse not worn off yet, Miss Bell?

Potter is evidently continuing his practice of befriending rather dodgy people, following on his friendship with the Hogwarts groundskeeper and Care of Magical Creatures instructor, the half-giant Rubeus Hagrid, who was expelled from Hogwarts years ago following a student's death. Hagrid's mother is infamous giantess Fridwulfa. He also did a stretch in Azkaban four years ago.

Although Potter is credited with helping to recover the kidnapped Hogwarts Potions master, Severus Snape, who was once accused of being a Death Eater, he is also being blamed by Ambrose Davies for his son Evan's death. The Ravenclaw prefect received burns to over 95\% of his body and died of asphyxiation during Snape's rescue, which Potter recklessly spearheaded without permission from the headmaster nor any other members of the Hogwarts teaching staff. But then, Potter has shown a tendency to disregard authority before (the Triwizard Tournament was to have been for students over the age of seventeen, while Potter entered at the age of fourteen) and has yet to get his comeuppance for it. Instead he is rewarded with the post of Head Boy.

Miss Bell should perhaps consider more carefully whether she wishes to compromise her future by consorting with someone whose actions have led to two Hogwarts students being killed in two year's time (Diggory being the other) through his carelessness and bravado, but as she seems to have a cavalier attitude about forgiving her father for killing her mother, perhaps such advice would simply fall on deaf ears.

Harry just groaned continuously. Almost no one he knew was *not* being dragged through the mud in this article. Mrs. Figg miraculously escaped the reporter's notice, but he half expected to see something about his aunt and uncle, and he probably would have if they weren't Muggles. Sirius wasn't mentioned, and neither were Ron and Ginny. That was good. But even Snape's history as a Death Eater was brought up, and that was ancient history — let alone the question of why Hagrid was expelled. *Damn damn damn*, he thought.

The tone of the article was distressingly familiar. He checked, but the byline wasn't *Rita Skeeter*, it was *Daisy Furuncle*. He frowned. Where was

Rita Skeeter, come to think of it? he thought. Hadn't she gone missing about the same time as Snape the previous summer? He would have to write to Dumbledore to ask him. Or maybe Mrs. Figg would know, since she was also an operative.

He perused the article again. *Bell and Potter dined very cozily in a secluded corner of a private dining room, away from prying eyes.* Yeah, we were so far away from prying eyes that they managed to take a picture to make us look like we were snogging when we weren't.

Hermione didn't come off very well, as the reporter clearly believed the rubbish Skeeter had put out during the Tournament concerning her and Harry. Was the writer accusing him of killing Krum and Diggory? So he could get Cho Chang? And then Aberforth and Sam were portrayed in the worst possible light, and Draco Malfoy would have a fit about the "dire straits" part. He was very touchy about his money situation. As if that weren't bad enough, the reporter had to go and bring up Hagrid again. And had Ambrose Davies really been putting around that it was Harry's fault Evan had died? Harry shuddered, seeing Evan again, screaming, clothed in fire...

He balled up the article and threw it across the room. *Just what I need right now.* He hoped Katie hadn't seen it. Then he realized she probably already had; she must have been throwing a copy of the *Prophet* into the back seat of her car when she picked him up. That's why she was behaving so awkwardly, and why she didn't want to go to Diagon Alley.

And Hermione. *Eerg.* That wasn't going to help him mend fences with her.

Bloody hell.

He felt distracted and upset. What on earth was he doing when the owl arrived from Hermione? He looked up and saw the Pensieve on his desk. Oh, right. Looking for Peggy Weasley. Or Maggie Parrish. Or whatever Maggie Parrish's name was before she married Bernard Parrish.

He knew he couldn't count on her having married Bernard in this life, so he needed to know the name of her adoptive parents. He remembered seeing a framed copy of their wedding invitation near the door to the flat, but without magic he couldn't pull the names on it out of his brain. He had decided to put the memory of that visit to Maggie and Bernard into the Pensieve and enter it, try to *really* see the invitation this time...

He thought of that day, of following her on the tube and then ringing her doorbell; he thought of the conversation he'd had with her and Bernard in the foyer of the building, with the dog Billy. He thought of sitting in their flat, talking...

Harry put his wand to his temple, then drew it away slowly, sending the thought arcing in a silver stream to the large stone bowl. When he was done he put his wand to the viscous surface, stirring until he saw in the bowl the living room of the Parrish flat in his other life. Bending over, he touched his nose to the viscous fluid, and suddenly found himself tumbling head over heels into the Pensieve once more.

He was back in Maggie and Bernard Parrish's sunny London flat during the previous autumn. The two of them were sitting on the sofa with their dog, talking to the other Harry, without the scar. Harry stared at himself; he seemed so different, and he had that *accent*. Somehow it made him sound older, he thought. He understood now why Maggie had thought he looked a bit old to be with her fifteen-year-old sister.

He wandered into the corridor that led to the front door of the flat; it was here, he thought; I'm sure of it. Finally, he found it. He had seen it in his other life, he had even read it, but to know what it said in detail, he needed to enter this memory physically, walk up to it and take a really good look.

He read the Parrishes' wedding invitation: \vfill{

*Mr. and Mrs. Sean R. Dougherty
request the honor of your presence
at the marriage of their daughter
Margaret Mary Beatrice
to*

Bernard R. Parrish, III

*Saturday, the third of August, nineteen-hundred and ninety-six
one o'clock in the afternoon*

*St. Bartholomew Roman Catholic Church
Dorchester*

*Reception to follow at the White Swallow Inn, Dorchester
The favor of a reply is requested.*

Harry swallowed. *Her name had been Margaret Mary Beatrice Dougherty and her father was Sean R. Dougherty and they went to the parish of St. Bartholomew in Dorchester.*

He flipped himself out of the Pensieve again and after stumbling for a moment, he scrambled for some parchment and ink and scribbled down the information he'd just found. Now — how to find out what he needed to know?

He itched to just go into the next room and use Dudley's computer, but he didn't dare; his aunt would skin him alive if he touched any of Dudley's things, and until now he'd been unwilling to disturb the shrine for his own reasons. But this was *important*; this was restoring the lost Weasley sisters — or one of them — to their family. He paced and thought for the first time, *If only Aunt Petunia had fixated on me after Dudley died instead of Dunkirk...*

Harry stopped his pacing and smiled to himself. He knew how to get into Dudley's room to use the computer.

* * *

"Hello again, Mrs. Dursley."

"Hello, Draco", Aunt Petunia simpered. Harry tried very, very hard not to roll his eyes. "Do come in", she added, ushering him into the entrance hall. "How are you today?"

"Quite well, quite well", he said, sounding more aristocratic than ever. Well, Harry had told him to use the Malfoy charm (trying not to gag at the oxymoron). "You're looking quite lovely today", Draco added. Harry would have to talk to him later about laying it on so thick. *It was starting to verge on the —*

"Oh, thank you, that really *means* something, coming from such a handsome young man —"

— *vomit-inducing*, Harry thought, trying to swallow his gorge.

"So", she said, looking very pleased with herself for having him in her home. "What brings you to our humble abode?"

"I'm, er — Harry. When he stayed at Mrs. Figg's last summer he was reading a book of mine, and he said I could come over and get it back."

Harry groaned inwardly; *that* wasn't the story they'd agreed on, but evidently the Malfoy brain wasn't capable of remembering more than —

"Harry!" his aunt immediately reprimanded him. "I knew we were right not to get you a library card. You shouldn't have made the poor boy come over here looking for his book! Now go get it, and *apologize* when you get back!"

This was *not* how it was supposed to go. "Um — I'm not sure where it is now. I may have left it in Dudley's room —"

"You left it in —!" his aunt started to say, turning white. "You know you are forbidden to go in there!"

Harry tried to look sheepish. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Is it all right if *I* go into your son's room, Mrs. Dursley?"

She smiled on him with beneficence. "Of course, dear boy, of course." She gave Harry a cold look over her shoulder as the three of them ascended the stairs. When they reached Dudley's room, there was no sign of a book anywhere. When Harry had moved into Dudley's second bedroom not long before he turned eleven, the only things in the room other than the bed and desk were broken toys and books — in other words, things which had been banished because they were of no use to Dudley. Books were not usually part of the landscape for Dudley Dursley, and if there were one in his bedroom now, it would have stood out like a wizard's hat on Vernon Dursley's head.

Instead, Draco had the desired reaction to the computer on Dudley's desk. "Oh! Is that an Alpha — 4000X?" he asked in apparent rapture, upon seeing the simple putty-colored machine, but pronouncing the name awkwardly, as though he were trying to remember what Harry had coached him on.

Petunia Dursley smiled. "Yes. Do you enjoy computers?"

"Do I! Mine is in storage right now, and I probably have ever so many amails —" Harry dug his elbow into his ribs and mouthed the letter `E' at him. "Er — emails waiting for me when I leg on — I mean, log on again..."

"Well, why don't you just use Dudley's machine while you're in Little Whinging? It's just gathering dust. Harry wouldn't know what to do with it", she said contemptuously, her voice dropping. She rolled her eyes, as though Harry were far too stupid and hopeless to ever learn how to use a typewriter that had only two keys.

"Really? You mean it? That would be smashing. I'd really appreciate that."

"Oh, don't mention it", she said, blushing. "Go right ahead. Harry! Get him a chair!" There had been a desk chair at one time, but Harry noticed that it was broken and the pieces were piled in a corner. Harry scrambled into his own bedroom and returned with his own chair. Petunia watched Draco sit down and stood looking at him and the dark computer monitor expectantly. Harry was afraid she wouldn't leave; Draco Malfoy knew nothing about computers. Harry was going to have to be the one to operate it, and if she didn't get out that wouldn't be possible.

"Actually, shouldn't we get over to Mrs. Figg's?" he said suddenly to Draco. "We were going to, er, do some gardening for her. Perhaps Draco could come back tomorrow afternoon. I can look for his book tonight." He knew that on Sunday afternoons, Petunia usually pretended to be cutting roses to put in the house when she was actually craning her neck over the garden fence, spying on the neighbours. This was an important part of her week, and she tried not to miss it. He also knew that Draco wouldn't come in the morning as he reveled in having Mrs. Figg's house to himself while she was at church.

"Why not the morning?" she asked. Harry grimaced; did she want to hang about? he wondered. Draco's eyes were very wide; he was clearly thinking furiously to figure out a way to avoid giving up his empty-house time. "Well, er, we go to church in the morning. Right. Every Sunday. Did last summer too. Except Harry. He wouldn't come with us."

Harry resisted the urge to kick him in the shins. Prat. Brown-nose.

"Harry!" Aunt Petunia said in her most disapproving tone. (And she had some *very* disapproving tones.) "You are to respect the rules of the home in which you are staying!" Then she turned back to Draco, smiling. "Well, isn't that a good idea. We, er, would have seen you in church last summer except that we were on holiday, of course, which is why Harry wasn't staying here. We'll see you in church tomorrow morning, then, won't we? And then in the afternoon you can come use Dudley's computer, all right? Say you'll come after church?"

Harry groaned. "Church? We're going to *church* tomorrow? We *never* go to church. Only Christmas and Easter."

Aunt Petunia became very military. "You will attend church tomorrow morning young man and you will behave yourself accordingly." She tsk-

tsked with her tongue and looked at Draco again. "Your parents must be so proud to have such a fine young man, going to church with your old nanny. There aren't *many*", she looked pointedly at Harry, "young people still willing to do what's right these days."

"And when's the last time *you* were in church, I wonder?" Harry muttered under his breath, but not so softly she couldn't hear; she chose to ignore him. When they left number four and were walking to Mrs. Figg's house, Harry resisted the urge to push Draco Malfoy into a prickly rose bush.

"You never did tell me why you need to use that thing —" Draco Malfoy began, but Harry wasn't interested in that conversation.

"Thanks a lot, *Malfoy*", he said instead, kicking a fence post irritably. "Now we're stuck going to church tomorrow morning, thanks to *you*."

"How did I know she was going to do that?" His voice rose in pitch to a squeak. "You think I want to go to ruddy *church*?"

"Well, you shouldn't have pretended to so pious. Don't know why you're being such a toady with my aunt anyway."

But now Draco Malfoy had stopped and he became very quiet, fingering a piece of shrubbery. "She fusses over me. She — she reminds me a bit of my mum." He started walking again then and Harry frowned for a moment before catching him up.

"*What* did you say?"

"You heard me. I'm not repeating myself", he answered irritably, striding forward purposefully. They had actually gone past Mrs. Figg's without noticing and were headed toward the park now. Harry remembered when Ginny was telling him about how she and Draco Malfoy had become friends, the way she'd held his hand in the infirmary when he'd called out for his mother in his delirium.

"She wasn't bad, you know. When I was younger. Always gave me whatever I wanted."

Harry pursed his lips disapprovingly. "That's called spoiling. That's what my aunt and uncle did with Dudley, too." Then he remembered that the first time he met Draco, in Madam Malkin's dress shop, he had immediately been reminded of Dudley, due to Draco's saying that he was going to bully his father into buying him a racing broom (despite the fact that brooms were forbidden to first year students).

Draco remained silent as they walked. Soon they were at the park; evidently Rodney Jeffries was putting on another show, for people were in a queue that wrapped around the huge tent and across the grass to the pavement, waiting to pay their twenty pounds. Harry stood and shook his head, watching, then noticed Draco Malfoy doing the same thing. Well, he thought, at least there's something on which we agree.

Then Harry noticed a lone figure at the edge of the green, a man around thirty, small and thin, wearing a pale grey suit and a clergyman's collar. He recognized Mr. Babcock, the vicar. He wasn't shaking his head, like Harry and Draco, but he *was* visibly shaking, and in fact looked quite ill as he beheld the queue of people waiting to hear the charismatic speaker. Harry watched him turn away from the park and walk toward St. Bede's, as though he were a doomed man walking toward the gallows.

* * *

When he returned to Privet Drive he noticed what appeared to be a flock of owls clustered on the tar-papered roof. One of them was nibbling at the evergreen branch attached to the gable. When he began to walk toward the front door, they started to descend on him and he had to beat them away. "Wait on the roof again!" he told them irritably. "I'll go upstairs and open my window!" The birds retreated to the roof once more and when Harry opened his bedroom window and whistled to them, they began to stream in. Soon there were owls perched all over the room. Harry went to a medium-sized tawny owl first so he could get it off his bedstead and removed the letter from its leg, shooing it out the window afterward.

"No, I'm not giving you anything! I don't have enough owl-treats for all of you!" He unrolled the parchment, irritated. What he found didn't surprise him a bit. Letter after letter had been sent on the heels of the *Prophet* article, vilifying him for causing Evan Davies' death, asking him what sane father would allow his daughter near him, and how could Albus Dumbledore allow such a person to be Head Boy. He was making the rounds of the letters as quickly as he possibly could, shooing the owls out the window again as soon as he'd retrieved the parchments they were carrying, but a couple of times he didn't get to a howler in time and soon there was screeching all over the house from irate witches and wizards who now thought he was the scourge of the wizarding world.

"*What's going on up there?*" Vernon Dursley bellowed from his previously-peaceful living room, where he was watching football.

"*Nothing!*" Harry bellowed back, just as another howler burst open. This time phrases like "wizarding Don Juan" were being shouted at top-volume, and Harry winced and shoved the alarmed owl out the window. When he was finally down to three owls, and it didn't look like they had howlers, he approached them cautiously and took their parchments, prepared for more personal attacks. The first one, however, was a surprise.

Dear Harry,

I hope you haven't read the Prophet lately, but I should warn you that there's a dreadful article in it which may get some people wound up for a while. If you get any negative reaction from it —

If? Harry thought ruefully.

— don't pay it any mind. The people who know you and love you know not to believe any of that rubbish. I just wanted you to know you have my complete support.

When did you start seeing the Bell girl? I remember Sam Bell; he worked with your mum. At any rate, this will all blow over. I have some interesting things to tell you about Wormtail's confession when you come to Ascog Castle, and the entire family is looking forward to meeting you.

— Sirius

Harry smiled. *The people who know you and love you...* He opened another letter and found, to his surprise, that this one was from Mariah Kirkner.

Dear Harry,

I've used our fastest owl, so I hope this reaches you quickly. I am writing this just after reading that thing passing for journalism in the Prophet. No one who was in the forest blames you for Evan Davies. We know he turned on you and the rest of us. You have the support of

the entire Dueling Club, and the rest of the students at Hogwarts as well. Those of us who are prefects elected you Head Boy by acclamation for a very good reason. I am writing to the Prophet as soon as I send this to you. They will be getting a storm of owls from the rest of the students and teachers as well. I will see to it. Say hello to Draco for me.

— Mariah

Harry sat down on his bed with a thump. He was floored. He remembered in his fifth year when Will Flitwick declared that he wasn't to blame for Cho and his great-uncle being in the hospital wing, and all of Gryffindor House had joined in the show of solidarity. When he read the article he hadn't expected either attacks or support to come to Privet Drive from the wizarding world. Except for letters from Ron, Hermione, Sirius and Hagrid he usually didn't have much contact with the wizarding world during the summer. Even the previous summer, when he was working with three other wizards, he didn't feel that his summer had any more of a wizarding component than usual.

There was only one owl left, which Harry recognized now as Hermes, Percy Weasley's owl, which he had received from his parents when he was made a prefect. Harry didn't remember whether Ginny had received anything in particular when *she'd* been made a prefect. He unrolled the parchment and read the letter.

Dear Harry,

I expect you've seen the Prophet article by now. I've had such a time getting Fred and George to shut up about it! They think it's riotously funny, of course. Ron and I are staying in Hogsmeade with Percy and the twins this weekend, and on Monday we're Flooing to the the Leaky Cauldron, where Hermione and Draco are supposed to meet us. Thank you for thinking of all this. I've never been to the cinema and I'm quite looking forward to it. I hope Draco doesn't suspect anything about his party.

I'm assuming you were only talking to Katie in that photograph, since the reporter seemed determined to make you look as terrible as

possible. Katie's very nice and you're working together; I'm sure you were just out together as friends. Why do other people have to twist things so? No one who knows you will believe anything in that dreadful article, and that means everyone at the school, students and teachers alike. We all know you should be Head Boy even if this Daisy Furuncle doesn't.

Thank you again for helping with Draco's party. I'll see you Monday night. Ron says hello and that he already wrote you last night. He's been spending quite a lot of time out back today with Remus Lupin doing what seem to be very strange dances. Don't ask; when I did I received an answer that made my eyes glaze over. I'm sure he'll be happy to enlighten (which is to say bore) you on Monday.

*Love,
Ginny*

Harry stared at the letter. She didn't believe he and Katie were anything more than friends. He felt himself flush, remembering kissing her. Ginny always believed the best in everyone until it was absolutely proven that something else was the truth. He thought of the way she'd befriended and then become more than friends with Draco Malfoy. She'd given him a chance where many, many others never would have. What was between him and Katie? We're just dating a little, he told himself. But somehow he felt embarrassed at the idea of Ginny finding out that it *was* actually a date.

He waved Hermes out the window, still holding Ginny's letter. It sounded like Lupin was keeping Ron busy, so he wasn't surprised that he didn't get another letter from him. Hermione had only written to send him the article and to be snippy; *she* obviously believed that he was already "involved" with Katie. Was she upset that he seemed to be over her so quickly, or over Ginny? Did she even realized the depth of his feelings for Ginny?

He sighed, watching Hermes fly out of sight, then looking down at the letter in his hand from the girl he needed to try to forget. The final two words kept echoing in his head:

Love, Ginny.

* * *

Harry managed to get through the service the next morning by daydreaming about Quidditch. He was also occasionally afforded some amusement by the fact that Draco Malfoy had no idea what he was doing and would invariably stand, sit or kneel at the wrong time. Several times he read words aloud from the prayer book along with Mr. Babcock, who was eying him in a very unfriendly way by the end of the service.

When they stood to sing the final hymn, Harry looked around while the organist played the verse through once. There weren't very many people present at all; it seemed there had been a lot more when he was young. Of course, he'd only ever experienced Easter and Christmas services, which were well-populated. He understood now why St. Bede's could no longer afford a rector. There couldn't be more than twenty-five people in attendance, and four of them (Harry, Draco and the Dursleys) weren't normally there.

As the postlude was cranked out on the rickety-sounding organ, Mr. Babcock walked down the aisle of the church, his cassock slightly frayed and a haggard look on his face. Harry already felt the heat of the summer day making his white shirt stick to his back, and it was only noon. There was no ventilation in the little stone church and it felt like an oven. The flowers on the communion table were already wilting. It's probably much cooler outside, Harry thought, yearning for the shade of leafy trees and cool grass to walk on barefoot.

But they weren't allowed outside yet. They filed into the parish hall for some weak tea, stale biscuits and tea sandwiches, and Harry grew nostalgic for the lovely soft bread with egg wash he'd had after the Sabbath service at Rabbi Pelta's synagogue. There had also been crunchy pickles and salty fish salad and crisp raw vegetables and other good food.. He watched Draco Malfoy pick desultorily at a very sad specimen of cucumber sandwich.

While they were drinking the horrible tea, Mr. Babcock meandered toward him and struck up a conversation. "Well! Some unfamiliar faces are here today", he said, trying unsuccessfully to sound cheerful. Harry had actually made a go of listening to the sermon for a little while, but the man's voice was uniquely downbeat and he'd had to tune it out or go mad. *Perhaps that's what's happened to the other parishioners*, he thought.

"Well, the last time I was here was for my cousin's funeral", Harry said evenly, trying to get rid of him. Mr. Babcock looked at him now through

narrowed eyes.

"Oh, yes, you're Mr. and Mrs. Dimsley's nephew —"

"Dursley", he correct Mr. Babcock, trying not to laugh. Maybe he wasn't so bad after all.

"Your name is Dursley? I thought it was Henry."

"Er, no, my name is Harry Potter. My aunt and uncle are Mr. and Mrs. Dursley."

"Oh, right, of course, of course."

Harry felt somewhat sorry for him; he seemed prematurely addled (although he might be older than he looks, he thought) and was as terrible as ever at making small talk and doing simple things like remembering people's names and relationships. To change the subject, Harry said, "I saw you yesterday when that lot of people were queued up for Rodney Jeffries."

He saw immediately that he had hit a nerve. "*Rodney Jeffries*", Mr. Babcock said bitterly. "Charlatan. He puts on a good *show*, that's all. Do you know we have virtually no choir now because he's taken all of the best singers to work for him while he's here? They're doing selections from stage musicals, of all things. Yes, I'm sure I could attract plenty of people if we decided to perform 'Phantom of the Opera' during mass. Bread and circuses, just bread and circuses..."

"So", Harry began, interested in the fact that he'd never seen Mr. Babcock remotely animated about *anything*, "you don't believe then that he's healed anyone?"

"*Healed*? Oh, yes, I daresay he's healed several people of hypochondria..."

"You think they were faking their illnesses? What about that man's burns on Bonfire Night?"

He snorted into his tea just as a balding man came upon them. "Who says he was ever burnt? The reports were so cloudy."

"Really? So no one can corroborate the report that the man had burnt himself?"

The balding man spoke now. He looked vaguely familiar to Harry. "Ah, you've gotten him going on Rodney Jeffries again, it seems."

Mr. Babcock looked up, startled, then calmed again. "Oh, hello, Forbes. Harry — er —"

"Potter."

"Yes, of course. Harry Potter, this is Dr. Forbes. As you can imagine, the medical community isn't exactly throwing parties in Jeffries' honor, either."

"Hello, Harry. I remember you, of course. You look quite different, but I'd know that scar anywhere. Been many years since your aunt and uncle brought you and your cousin for check-ups. I suppose once you both went off to boarding school you had your school matrons to care for you... I was so sorry when I heard about your cousin. My condolences."

"Thank you, sir", Harry answered. He quickly changed the subject. "So — are you as upset about Jeffries as Mr. Babcock?"

"I don't know whether 'upset' is quite the right term... I mean, there are safeguards in the medical profession, you know? The government ascertains whether someone is fully educated and fit to be a doctor. If you feel you have not received competent care, you have channels you can go through for redress of grievances. Who has ascertained that this Jeffries fellow is only helping people and not hurting them? Even if he convinces someone that they don't need a wheelchair any longer, what happens when they suddenly become convinced again that they *do* and go tumbling downstairs? If someone believes he has in fact hurt them instead of helping them, how do they get satisfaction?"

Harry frowned. "Do either of you actually *know* what he does when all these people come to hear him?"

Both men shook their heads. "No idea", Mr. Babcock said. "I'm not about to throw away twenty pounds finding out."

"Hmmm..." Harry said, his hand on his chin. "I admit — I'm curious. I don't think I believe he's really doing what people say, but I'd like to at least see it, find out why people are so thoroughly convinced. I can tell you about it afterward, if you like."

Mr. Babcock nodded. "I'd appreciate that. Mind you don't get sucked into his world, though."

Dr. Forbes agreed. "He's seems to be like some sort of Svengali, hypnotizing people with his eyes and whatnot. I daresay they'd believe him if he told them all they were purple hippos."

Harry thought it was possible they were exaggerating and grew more and more curious to see the real thing and judge for himself. "Well — I'm not usually taken in by people like that. I have a pretty healthy skepticism."

Dr. Forbes clapped him on the shoulder. "Good boy. That will serve you well, mark my word."

After they returned home, Draco came with him to Dudley's room, and they were able to use Dudley's computer without Aunt Petunia hanging over them. (Harry had secretly chuckled at the way she'd hung over Draco Malfoy in the parish hall while he ate his tea sandwiches.) Harry didn't have any trouble finding several search engines so he could attempt to locate a Sean or Margaret Dougherty. The problem was the sheer number of people with those names in Great Britain. Harry saved all of the information the search engines found so he could plow through it later and Draco went back to Mrs. Figg's (he'd found Dudley's hand-held games machine and quickly became addicted to it — Harry let him take it with him, assuming his aunt wouldn't notice).

The next day Harry took Draco Malfoy's new broom out to the car when Sam and Katie picked him up for work, since Draco had taken the day off. When Katie saw him she looked quite red; perhaps she had also received some owls in reference to the *Prophet* article. Sam turned around before starting the car and Harry braced himself, but then he saw that the older man was smiling sunnily at him.

"Have a good laugh over that *Prophet* article, Harry?" he said, before facing front again and putting the car into gear. Harry turned in confusion to Katie, who was sitting next to her dad.

"Erm —" was all he could think of. Sam laughed.

"Oh, don't worry Harry. I don't particularly care what the wizarding community thinks of me or I'd spend more time in Diagon Alley than I do — which is no time at all. I didn't even get the *Prophet* or have the flat on the Floo network before this summer. Katie already explained to me that you two weren't really kissing in that photo. I know how these things work. What did you think, Harry, I'd be hexing you as soon as you came out here this morning? If I didn't trust you I never would have suggested the two of you go out. Katie thought I was mad because when the tenth owl came flying into our flat Saturday night with yet *another* marriage proposal, I couldn't stop laughing for almost twenty minutes. A number of young — and some not-so-young — wizards want to rescue her from you. I've never seen anything so funny..."

Harry swallowed and smiled feebly at Sam, who had glanced at him in the mirror, a merry look in his eyes. "It wasn't just what they said about

Katie and me, though. They said awful things about — about why you went to Azkaban, and about me being responsible for Evan dying, and Cedric and Viktor Krum. And all that about Hermione and Cho being my 'cast-off' girlfriends. Hermione sent me a copy of the article. She was *not* happy. You wouldn't believe the horrid letters I've been getting — including some howlers. I also had three letters from friends, which made me feel a little better. My aunt and uncle were screaming back at me about the noise from the howlers — the neighbours must have thought we were having a terrific row —"

Sam pulled onto the motorway leading to New Stokington. "Oh, Harry. Buck up. It'll blow over in no time. And just think — Nigel and Trevor don't know anything. You won't have to think of it at all today. And later we've a party to go to. Thanks for getting a gift, by the way. I brought some wizarding money to pay for my portion and for Katie's. What kind of broom did you say it was, Katie?"

"Nimbus 2001", she said. "It's the same kind he had before, but now the price has come down. They've a new model."

"I still need to get a new broom for me, as well", Harry said. "My Firebolt bit the dust in the forest, like Draco's. This'll be my third broom since starting school."

Sam shrugged. "I never much fancied traveling by broom. I used to Apparate a lot. Once you've been to Azkaban, though, you get your Apparition license revoked and don't ever get it back. I haven't found that I miss it, actually. And by the time I was released it had been so long that I was afraid I'd splinch myself if I tried. Out of practice. These days I like to keep the car in good repair, and then I feel like I can go anywhere..."

Harry leaned back, watching the other cars whip past them on the motorway (it seemed that Sam was driving very fast) and he tried to take Sam's advice about not letting the article get to him. He hadn't received any nasty letters on Sunday, and only two before he went running with Draco early that morning (neither were howlers, fortunately). He wondered whether Mariah had gone through with her plan and whether, if the *Prophet* received letters of support for him, they'd print them. Then he thought again about Ginny's letter; it was really very sweet of her to write to him and reassure him. Then he shook his head as if to dislodge this thought from it. *No*. I am not going to be spending my time thinking Ginny is *sweet*. He looked at the back of Katie's head. *I'm sure you were just out*

together as friends. The trouble was, *he* wasn't so sure. Did he want it to be more? *I just don't want to go for years fixating on someone who doesn't want to be with me...*

Katie was slightly awkward around him at first when they arrived at the estate, but as the day went on, she behaved more naturally with him. While they were eating lunch, sitting near each other, Harry asked her quietly, "Are you as all right about the article as your dad is?"

She blushed again now and took a bite of her sandwich. "I was telling the truth about the photo, of course, but, well — Dad doesn't know about —"

"— about the other kissing."

"And about the tent in the park. And that I want to be an Auror."

"Oh, right."

"Of course, I've gotten rid of *that* ridiculous idea now..."

"Why?"

She frowned. "How stupid was it for me not to notice that someone was photographing us? I mean, a fine Auror I'd make if I couldn't detect *that*..."

"That's the sort of thing you learn in your training, I'm sure. You shouldn't let that discourage you. I didn't notice either. You know, I think you're overlooking something that may indicate you'd make a very good Auror."

"What?"

"The fact that Lucius Malfoy put Imperius on you and *you resisted*. That stupid article aside, you and I both know that you were mad about Lee that year and the curse had very little, if any, effect on you. Except at that Christmas party you threw. If that isn't an excellent indicator that you might do well as an Auror, I don't know what is. I'm the only one in my class who almost overcame Imperius on my first try, in fourth year."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, when we all thought Barty Crouch, Jr. was Moody and he was putting Imperius on us all?"

She shook her head. "He didn't do that with us."

"Really? I didn't know that..."

"And what do you mean 'except at that Christmas party'? What did I do at the Christmas party that made you think I was after you?"

"Well, um, when we were dancing..."

"Oh, *that*. I was trying to get Lee's attention again. We'd already been seeing each other — well, I think you figured that out after I had mononucleosis." She smiled shyly. "He was being a little stand-offish for a while after that. And it was my birthday, so I was trying to get him to —"

"Your birthday?"

She sighed. "Well, I wanted a party for my seventeenth birthday, but I was shy about inviting people to a birthday party so I said it was a Christmas party. I still got my wish. I'm just not as comfortable about these things as the twins; they're so outgoing. Maybe that's why Lee and I finally fizzled — I suppose we're too different. It's just hard getting someone out of your head when you've crushed on them for so long, and then you're actually a couple for a while..."

Suddenly, someone cleared a throat; it was a high-pitched clearing, and obviously for the purpose of getting their attention, not for actually throat problems. A girl with strawberry-blonde hair and rather tight clothing was standing before them. Harry hadn't noticed her walking up from the house, but now he recognized her as the daughter of the people they were working for. He'd so far only see her from a distance.

"Um — excuse me", she said in what seemed to be a very upper-crust voice. "You wouldn't happen know the whereabouts of Draco, would you?"

"Home. He took the day off, as it's his birthday", Katie told her tersely. Harry thought she sounded a little hostile and this surprised him.

"Oh — oh, that's too bad. I was — well, just tell him that Felice Harrington-Smyth wishes him many happy returns of the day."

"Right", Harry said, suddenly feeling mischievous. "Felicia Hampton-Sims wishes him many —"

"No, no, Harry", said Katie, quickly catching on. "It's Felicity Harper-Smee —"

The girl did not look pleased. "That's *Felice Harrington-Smyth*", she said icily before walking away. Harry and Katie waited until they thought she was sufficiently distant before bursting into laughter.

"Oh, we're terrible people", Harry said, practically crying with glee.

"Horrid, *awful* people", Katie agreed, holding her middle, then wiping tears from her eyes.

"Have you seen her before?" he asked her. She surprised him by looking rather embarrassed.

"Well — last Thursday I was going into the kitchen up at the big house so I could use the loo, and they were, um, talking in the scullery. Except that they *weren't* talking all the time —"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I heard their voices — both *rather* unmistakable, I think you'll agree — and then the talking stopped..."

"You're not saying —"

"I'm saying I don't *know* anything. Technically I didn't *see* anything. I know that they've talked and she wants to wish him a happy birthday, that's all. I didn't like to say anything because — well, I didn't want to get your hopes up —"

He frowned. "Get my hopes up? That he'd be cheating on Ginny?"

She sighed. "Yes. I mean, if they break up —"

"Oh", he said, suddenly understanding. "I see."

She frowned. "I should have told you. I'm sorry. Maybe this is good. For you. If he breaks up with Ginny —"

"That doesn't necessarily mean she'd want to be more than friends with me", he said bitterly. "And anyway — we don't know they were doing anything other than talking, do we?" They were sitting very close together and speaking in low tones; Harry wondered whether she was being completely open about why she didn't mention Draco and the Harrington-Smyth girl.

Then he flushed the same red as Katie as Nigel and Trevor started ribbing the two of them about planning to go off into the hedge maze for some snogging, now that they'd started dating (the brothers had awoken from their brief lunchtime naps). Harry was startled at first, then remembered that they probably had heard Sam arranging things when they were on Privet Drive. Harry threatened to turn the hose on the two of them and they finally stopped, after making loud kissing noises and and love-sick faces at Harry and Katie.

After Sam and Katie took him home (they kept the broom in the car) he went in to shower and change for the party. When he was coming downstairs in clean trousers and a blue-button-down shirt open at the collar, his uncle stopped him abruptly. "And where do you think *you're* going?"

His aunt was coming out of the kitchen wearing an apron, clearly in the midst of dinner preparations.

"Oh, I, ah — sorry I forgot to mention it, but I won't be here for dinner tonight —"

"To hell with you eating dinner. When is my roof going to be finished?" he bellowed. *Oh*, Harry thought, having forgotten all about this. There was still only tar paper protecting the house.

"We'll get back to work on it tomorrow, but today's Draco's birthday, and Mrs. Figg's giving him a party. The — the lads are coming to celebrate. And Katie. I may be back late."

Suddenly his aunt's eyes had lit up. "Birthday, you say? Party? At Arabella's?"

"Er — yeah", he said uncertainly. He didn't like the way she looked.

"Well", she said, suddenly sounding testy, "why don't you have a present?"

"I, er — I'm going in on one with Sam and Katie. They're bringing it."

She made a harrumphing noise as thought doubtful of this. He mumbled his goodbyes and managed to escape from the house, practically running to Mrs. Figg's in case they proposed coming along.

When he reached Mrs. Figg's block, he slowed down to a walk so he wouldn't knock on the door looking as though he'd run a marathon. Katie answered the door.

"Oh, good, you're here. They're not back from London yet. Hermione is supposed to be guiding them through the process of getting a bus to Little Whinging." She smirked. "I can't *wait* to see what Draco thinks of *that*."

He laughed and entered the house, and in a moment he was overwhelmed by Sirius slapping his back and giving him bear hugs. He sheepishly accepted the affection and hugged him back, remembering the article again. At least Sirius' name wasn't mentioned. A reporter could make quite a lot of his connection to Sirius Black.

"So", he said, dragging Harry into the living room, where he gave him a cup of punch, "when's the wedding?" His dark eyes twinkled at Harry and Katie.

"Sirius!" he exclaimed, mortified, just as Sam entered the room. "We aren't —"

"I know, Harry!" he laughed. "I'm sorry. I couldn't resist. You're not taking that *seriously*, I hope?"

Harry grimaced. "I'm not very *happy* about it, if that's what you mean. That article as much as said that I killed three people, two of them in order

to get their girlfriends, that I shouldn't be Head Boy because I'm always flouting authority, including entering the Tournament when I was too young, and it implies that Katie went out with me because she's still under Imperius. Yeah. I'm thrilled with the article. Never happier."

Sirius laughed again, and just as the doorbell rang and Mrs. Figg went to answer it, Harry found himself face-to-face with her brother, Mad-Eye Moody. Harry grinned at his homely visage.

"Professor Moody! I didn't know you were coming!"

"Ah, well — I can spare some time for a crafty Slytherin who's going to be of-age", he said with a crusty grin. "And who's managed to put Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban", he added. "That doesn't hurt."

Just then a tremendous amount of noise assaulted his ears as Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Draco spilled in the door and everyone started screaming, "*Surprise!*" Harry wasn't sure he'd ever seen Draco Malfoy look more shocked and pleased. There was general mayhem then, with Hermione looking very pleased to see Sirius and even Moody, who congratulated her upon being Head Girl (it seemed to Harry that she was avoiding *him*), Ron whispering to him amid the hubbub, "*So, Katie...?*" with his eyebrows dancing up and down madly, making Harry frown as he glanced at Ginny. Time seemed to stop for a moment then, and Harry almost thought someone had cast the *Tempus Fugit* spell, making everyone else in the world freeze while Ginny launched herself at him and gave him a huge hug. He held her for an agonizing moment, his nose in her hair, her warmth pressed to him, before she was gone again, laughing and talking with the others; he felt his heart turn over inside him. He had thought he was doing so well, too, forcing himself to get over her, and all he had to do was see her and receive one hug and he was hopelessly mooning over her again...

Katie walked up to him and smiled with understanding. He looked down and then up into her hazel eyes, knowing that she knew what he was feeling.

"I'm sorry Katie. I really am hopeless, aren't I?"

She shook her head. "No more than I am. You're fine, Harry. You're just human is all. Hardly a chargeable offense", she added with a smirk.

"Now don't *you* go harking back to that article", he warned her, "or I just may —"

"May what?" she said, a laughing challenge in her voice. But just then the doorbell rang again and Katie went to answer it. Harry looked around the room; who else was supposed to be coming? he wondered. Then he realized that Aberforth wasn't there yet, and reckoned that must be him.

It wasn't Aberforth.

An all-too-familiar voice wafted into the living room from the entrance hall, and to his horror, Harry looked up to see his aunt and uncle standing in the doorway.

"Harry told us that it was the dear boy's birthday, and we just wanted to stop by to give our good wishes", Aunt Petunia was saying. Harry noticed that she'd taken the trouble to put on a different dress and some fresh makeup, and that his truculent uncle did not look the least bit interested in wishing Draco Malfoy a happy birthday.

Very unfortunately, at that moment, the birthday boy was opening his new broom, grinning over it. When he noticed Petunia Dursley staring at him with a blank expression, he blanched (he actually had tanned a little already, so the difference was noticeable). Mrs. Figg came in the room then from the dining room and also noticed her former employers standing in her living room doorway.

"Oh — oh, Petunia, dear. Um, how — how unexpected —"

But what Harry's aunt had noticed was the presence of Sirius Black.

"You!" she said, her eyes wide, pointing at him. Next she noticed Hermione. "And you!" Hermione looked distinctly uncomfortable. Then she noticed Mad-Eye Moody and screamed at the sight of him. His sister immediately whipped out her wand and caused the still-open front door to slam shut.

"Quiet, you stupid woman! Do you want the neighbours to hear?"

Petunia Dursley turned to her now, to the woman she'd always thought was a cranky old woman who hated Harry enough to make his life miserable in her place when she couldn't be on hand to personally oversee making his life a misery. She was pointing shakily at Arabella Figg, who still held her wand. "You — you too —" she said feebly, with some effort, before putting her hand over her eyes and crumpling to the floor.

Harry's Aunt Petunia had fainted dead away.

Walls

To Harry's shock, Draco Malfoy dropped his new broom and leapt across the room when he saw Harry's aunt go down. Vernon Dursley shielded his wife from Draco, saying, "Get away from her! You — you —"

He was sputtering incoherently at the blond boy. Draco sank back on his haunches, his mouth very thin.

"I — I might be able to help —" he said feebly.

"You've helped enough!" Harry's uncle bellowed at him. Harry stepped forward and put his hand on Draco's shoulder; suddenly he seemed very much like his best friend in his other life, and he was glad he'd bought him the new broom. Harry mouthed the words "*Thanks anyway*" to him and gestured with his head to the chair where Draco had previously been sitting. He moved there obediently, looking a little put-out.

"Let's move her to the couch, Uncle Vernon", he said quietly; his uncle nodded, his mouth clamped shut as he looked desperately down at his wife. What he imagined would happen to them in a house full of witches and wizards Harry didn't know, but at least his uncle was letting him help.

Together they moved her limp body and out of the corner of his eye he noticed Mrs. Figg leaving the room. Vernon Dursley perched precariously on a small sliver of couch next to his wife, patting her hand and brushing her hair from her brow. "Petunia, my sweet... wake up dearie... wake up now, please..."

Mrs. Figg was back with a small vial which she unstopped; she started to move the vial near Petunia Dursley's face when Vernon Dursley covered his wife's mouth and bellowed, "You get away from her with your vile concoctions, woman! I don't want you near my wife!"

Mrs. Figg looked down at the vial in her hand and then at Vernon, one eyebrow raised.

"It's common smelling salts, Vernon."

He looked back at her, clearly embarrassed now. She held out the vial to him and he took it, then waved it back and forth under his wife's nose. Her eyes popped open and she coughed suddenly, her hand on her chest. Mrs. Figg took the vial back and stoppered it, then placed it on a nearby table.

Petunia Dursley's eyes were wild, taking in the roomful of people, including the gruesome visage of Mad-Eye Moody. Then she saw Arabella Figg again, and this time she looked like this was a good thing, someone familiar and reliable. "Oh, Arabella", she said weakly, "what's going on? Did I imagine it? I thought you —"

"You thought I was a Muggle. Of course you did, dear", she said, surprisingly warmly. "I meant for you to. As well as the entire village. I've been here to protect Harry for a very long time. I used to divide my time between Little Whinging and Malfoy Manor, where I worked as Draco's nanny —" she nodded at the blond Slytherin "— but when I was sacked by the Malfoys because they thought Draco was too old for a nanny I moved here full time."

Petunia raised herself up tentatively. "Do — do you *all* live here?" she asked shakily. I see, Harry thought. She wants to know how bad the local infestation is.

"No, Petunia, only Draco is living with me. The others have come from all over the country —"

"— and Scotland", Sirius cut in.

"— *all over the island of Great Britain*," she went on, glaring at Sirius, as though daring him to argue that the Isle of Bute was not part of the island of Great Britain, "to celebrate Draco's birthday. We didn't exactly expect you to walk in, you understand."

Harry saw his aunt swallow. She looked at Draco now, a look of great disappointment clearly showing on her face. Then she seemed to be *really* looking at Draco.

"I've seen you before", she said softly. "I mean before this summer..."

Draco nodded. "Yes. I was one of the pall-bearers for your son's funeral. Harry brought me", he said quietly.

She nodded, as though she understood now; Harry *had* wondered why she hadn't realized this earlier, but had put it down to her being so grief-stricken during the funeral that she hadn't been paying very close attention to what was occurring around her. She looked up at her husband now and whispered, "Help me to stand. I want to go home."

Vernon Dursley was unable to help her to rise unassisted, so Harry stepped forward and took her other arm. To his surprise, she let him. They moved toward the doorway to the living room, and Harry called over his shoulder, "I'll be back. Save me some cake."

It took longer than Harry would have thought to slowly walk his aunt the two blocks to Privet Drive and up to her bed. Harry stood by awkwardly while Vernon Dursley took off his wife's shoes.

"Um, I'm going back to the party now. She looks like she'll be all right now."

His uncle turned a gimlet eye on him. "You've been keeping things from us, boy. We'll talk about this tomorrow."

Harry drew his mouth into a line, not looking forward to this talk. "Yes, sir", he said softly before turning to leave. He wasn't feeling inclined to argue; it was amazing, really, that his aunt and uncle had gone this long without finding out about Mrs. Figg and Draco Malfoy. He couldn't recall whether they'd taken notice of Sam and Katie. Thank goodness Aberforth wasn't there yet, he thought.

He walked back to Mrs. Figg's house with his shoulders hunched, not feeling like he was in a party mood. His spirits lifted when he saw Katie waiting by the gate for him. When he was close enough she stood on her toes to kiss him on the cheek.

"You look like someone's died", she said, her voice very matter-of-fact.

"Not someone, *something*. It's the end of an era. And I have to have a *talk* with my uncle tomorrow because of it." He sighed and she laced her fingers through his.

"Come inside and try to cheer up. We've saved some cake for you and you've been spared hearing my father throw everyone off-key during *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow*."

He smiled at her, but then he saw that there was a shadow behind her eyes. "What's wrong, Katie? Why were you waiting out here? I could have changed my mind and decided not to come back tonight."

She shrugged. "I just wanted to get away from the party. I've had — something on my mind." He waited, and after a minute's pause, it all came tumbling out — Lee had sent her an owl when she'd gone home from work that evening.

"And it was just innocuous, really, just a friendly note to say that the business is going really well and I should come up to Hogsmeade to visit some time this summer and that Angelina misses me —" She sniffled and Harry saw now that her eyes were red-rimmed. "Not that *he* misses me, not that I should go up to visit *him*. I should come up to visit the lot of them, I should know that *Angelina* misses me." She swiped at an errant tear. Harry

hesitated only for a moment before he gathered her to him; her head rested comfortably just below his chin and she put her arms around him, making him feel a slight jolt from the contact.

They didn't speak but just stood in silent communion. Harry felt a light breeze lifting his hair and her warm breath through his shirt. He knew just how she felt; this was how he'd been earlier, when Ginny had hugged him, and Katie had been so understanding...

He felt tempted to kiss her for a moment, but he decided not to, as he didn't know whether her father might be looking out of one of the windows of the house. Instead he pulled back from her and handed her a handkerchief to dry her eyes. As she did so, he smiled at her with understanding, saying, "We're quite a pair, yeah?"

She nodded, smiling ruefully at him before blowing her nose. She pocketed his handkerchief and they walked toward the house hand-in-hand; they didn't need to say anything else. The walking wounded easily recognized each other.

Inside, the party was surprisingly noisy; Harry wondered whether Mrs. Figg had put a silencing charm on the walls of the house so the neighbors wouldn't hear and come investigating, or send the police investigating. All they needed was a Muggle police officer walking in and seeing someone doing magic. Perhaps after the episode with his Aunt Petunia, Mrs. Figg decided there'd been enough revelations for the night.

Aberforth had arrived since he'd left and was in the living room now; the conversation between him, Sam, Remus and Sirius was so loud it was making Harry's head hurt. They kept overlapping each other with their loud comments and laughing even louder, and Harry began to doubt that they had the same harmless punch in their paper cups that he had in the one Katie had handed him when they'd returned to the fray.

Mrs. Figg was speaking to her brother, Draco and Ginny in a corner of the dining room; evidently, Draco was regaling them with the story of the bouncing ferret himself. (That was fair, Harry thought. He owns the story, he should tell it.) He seemed to have gotten over his fear of giving his old nanny "ideas." Moody was laughing uproariously, his cracked face contorted beyond recognition as human. Ginny met Harry's eye for a heartbreaking moment; he looked away first, feeling annoyed with himself. He decided to find Ron and Hermione.

They were in the kitchen; Hermione was cutting some more slices of cake. Ron was sitting on the opposite side of the table from her, shoveling cake into his mouth and looking as though he was using the table as a shield, to separate the two of them. She looked up at Harry stonily when he entered with Katie. Ron didn't notice Hermione's reaction but came bounding over to him, grinning. "Harry! You'll never guess what! Later in the summer the Holyhead Harpies are playing the Chudley Cannons on the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch, and Percy and the twins said if we want to come up for the match, they'll put us up. Isn't that brilliant?"

Harry remembered going to Quidditch games with his stepfather in his other life, and he grinned. "The Holyhead Harpies are my favorite team!" he responded enthusiastically. Ron frowned.

"Since when? I thought you were a Cannons fan, like me?"

"Well, when I became your friend, I had to take your word for it when it came to Quidditch teams, didn't I? Maybe I've changed my mind about my favorite." Then he grinned mischievously, to show he was joking. He found that his other life crept in at the most unpredictable times. *What's my favorite Quidditch team? The Holyhead Harpies.* It was just reflex. It was also easy to forget that no one else knew about his other life — except for Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore.

Ron grinned, showing that he got the joke (and showing, by his discolored teeth, that this wasn't the first serving of chocolate cake he'd had). He'd just opened his mouth to say something else, looking very excited, when Hermione came up to him and put her hand on his arm. He flinched so drastically that the cake on the plate in his hand went flying and then he was desperately rushing to clean it up, shaking off Hermione impatiently. Harry saw her look of hostility turn to hurt, and he looked at Katie and motioned to Hermione with his head; Katie immediately understood. She helped Ron clean up the mess, then said, "Have you talked to my dad yet, Ron? Come on out and say hello..."

Harry stood in Hermione's path when she attempted to follow them out of the kitchen. She glared up at him. "We have to talk, Hermione", he said simply. Her glare did not waver. He took her upper arm in his hand and steered her toward the back door and out into the garden. She sat on a bench, her hands grasping her upper arms as though she were cold, looking obstinately away from him.

He stood looking at her, arms crossed, waiting. Finally, he grew tired of this and said to her, "Out with it." She looked up at him, a little less hostile, but no more talkative than she had been. He grew exasperated. "Oh, come on, Hermione, you know how so-called journalists warp things. Remember that *Witch Weekly* article Snape read in Potions class? Was any of *that* true?" Silence. "Cut it out, Hermione. Enough with the silent treatment. I know it's the article. What exactly are you most upset about?"

She looked up at him. "Yes, I'm upset. Do you want to know why? Do you? Do you?" Her voice rose in pitch with each repetition. Harry frowned and backed off a little.

"Erm — yeah."

"All right. Let's just go back to the Yule Ball in fourth year, shall we? Does that prat ask me, even though I *know* he likes me? No, he does not. And does Viktor ask me because he likes me? No, it turns out Crouch engineered that, too. And just when I decide to let go of the whole idea of Ron because he was just *too immature* for words, you seem like you might be interested in me, and I'm scared to do anything about it, but then I'm under the influence of a potion that acts like *Imperius*. And even then, I had to use the excuse of teaching you to kiss Cho Chang to get you to kiss me the first time. Then you blame me for Dudley's dying —"

"Hermione —"

"— and *Ron* has to convince you to make up with me. And *then* he *finally* admits how he feels about me, and it turns out he's told you to break up with me. And then you do, *giving* me to him like a neatly-wrapped birthday present. And what does he do? Walks away. Then he goes and —" her voice caught for a moment. "— offers himself to the spiders in my place, the great brave git, and we have a few minutes of real happiness. *Then* he gets bitten by a werewolf, and the next day he wants nothing to do with me. And then *today* we go to a film in London, almost like a real *date*, except that we're really babysitting his sister — who *needs* no babysitting — and I can't even get him to put his arm around me while we're in the theatre. He's been friendly, oh yes; he's been conversational and polite. But he hasn't been a boyfriend by any stretch of the imagination, and I'm starting to think it's the last thing he wants!"

Her voice had risen again. Harry stared at her helplessly; her chest was heaving with emotion. She wasn't done yet. "So forgive me if I'm feeling rejected in general when, on top of Ron's persistent refusal to even try for

us to have a relationship, I open the *Evening Prophet* on Friday night and discover a picture of you snogging Katie Bell as though you hadn't a care in the world. And then there's an article describing me as a 'cast-off' girlfriend of yours. I'm a cast-off, all right. I've been rejected by Harry Potter *and* his best friend, *and* a world-famous Quidditch player —"

"— who *you* were actually rejecting —" he reminded her.

"*Whom* I was rejecting", she corrected him. "And the *one* nice bloke who asked me to the Yule Ball now has a thing for Ginny —"

Harry furrowed his brow. "Who?"

She looked up at him. "Oh, you'll be glad to know that you have company in the Pining-for-Ginny-Weasley club."

"Wh-what? P-pining for G-ginny —?"

"Nice Quirrell impression, Harry. Yes. Pining for Ginny. What, do you think I'm stupid? Ron, on the other hand... Yes, I love him, but I also just want to *throttle* him sometimes. If he hadn't *told* you to break up with me, you probably would have done it *much* sooner. And yes, I still would have been hacked off at you, because that's still a blow to a girl's self-esteem. But it would have passed, and at least I wouldn't have felt like I was having to kidnap you to go up to Fluffy's old lair. That didn't exactly do wonders for my self-esteem either. But, of course, you're as stubborn as he is, so you didn't do *exactly* what you wanted to do just because *he* wanted you to do it as well; you decided to be contrary. Gah! Sometimes I don't know why I've bothered with the pair of you..."

He drew his lips together. "I'm sorry, Hermione. You're right; it wasn't fair for me to stay with you when I felt the way I did about her, and I *was* just being contrary. I should have ended it a lot sooner, and then you and Ron would have had a chance to really be a couple, and maybe he never would have been bitten —"

She grimaced and crossed her leg, jiggling it impatiently. "Yes, well, it's rather late for that now, isn't it?"

"And anyway — who are you talking about? Who else is in this Pining-for-Ginny-Weasley club? Other than Jules Quinn, and she's known he has a crush on her since he was a first year."

"Are you blind? Oh, I forget — you *are* blind. I'm amazed that you didn't fail everything this year — you were in another world constantly. I mean Neville, of course. He asked her to the Ball after I turned him down, remember? I think I should have lied to Viktor and told him I'd already

accepted Neville's invitation. Then maybe I'd have a perfectly nice, *normal* boyfriend right now who wouldn't be so interested in rejecting me..."

Harry sighed and sat down next to her. "Hey. Come here." He opened his arms wide and she hesitated a moment before climbing into them. I seem to be in the business of comforting girls pining after other blokes tonight, he thought. "You know I didn't reject you; I simply recognized our relationship for what it was: something that grew out of an unnatural situation — you know, that *Imperius* Potion — and just a bit of curiosity. I mean, we're only human, and being such good friends and otherwise thinking of people of the opposite sex as fair game for dating, probably sooner or later we'd have wondered whether we should try to make a go of it. If you and Ron weren't dating, that is. So it's just as well we've gotten all that out of our systems. I really want us to be good friends again. I *miss* you dreadfully", he said, tightening his grip on her and putting his cheek on the top of her head.

She put her arms around his waist. "Oh, Harry, so do I. I suppose you must think I'm a vain idiot, but — but I *have* been feeling so rejected — it's hard. I look in the mirror and I say, "I'm Head Girl of Hogwarts. I have marks most of the *teachers* probably didn't get when they were in school. I've helped you in first, third, fifth and sixth years when you were fighting evil, and I helped you a bit during the Tournament, too."

"And don't forget that even when you were Petrified in second year, if I hadn't found that torn page about the basilisk in your hand, we never would have understood what we were up against."

She blushed and looked pleased now. "You don't know how glad I was to see you and Ron when I woke up. Especially — well, I could especially tell that *he* was glad I was all right —" She ducked her head bashfully again. "But I — I didn't want to acknowledge any feelings I might have had for him yet. We were so *young*..."

"...and you were still crushing on Lockhart..."

She pulled back and hit him on the chest, but it didn't hurt and she was grinning. "I was twelve years old! You're never going to let me forget what an idiot I was over him, are you?"

He grinned back at her. "It will haunt you for the rest of your life. Just accept it. You can needle me about Cho and Ron about Fleur Delacour, if that's any comfort."

She looked at him earnestly. "Promise me something, Harry."

He calmed down and looked soberly back at her. "Anything." And the moment he said it, he realized that he meant it.

"Promise me that no matter what happens, the three of us will always stay friends. If Ron and I don't — well, you know. I want the three of us to always be friends, to be there for each other."

He nodded, then rested his brow against hers. "Absolutely." She looked back at him, her brown eyes very close to his.

"Harry?" she whispered.

"What?" he whispered back, unable to look away from her.

"When school starts, the first time you accompany Ron during the full moon — I want to come, too."

Now he pulled back from her in horror. "Hermione — no! I know you want the three of us to be friends always, but — even in my griffin form — I can't guarantee that I could keep Ron from tearing you apart! I mean, if he's taken the potion and it works, there shouldn't be a problem — but you can never be too careful. I think that even if he's had the potion, if he's in his wolf form and bites you, even a small nip, you could become a werewolf." He stopped suddenly, a horrible thought coming to him. "Is *that* it? You *want* to become a werewolf too? No, Hermione, you don't know what you're suggesting —"

She hit him again, a little less playfully than before. "Neither do you, you great prat. I don't want to become a werewolf! Let's see — what would you say if I told you that Professor McGonagall is staying with us this summer and giving me private tuition in something she'd been teaching me all last year —" She paused, watching his face, waiting for the realization to dawn on him. When it finally did, she laughed out loud.

"Hermione! That's wonderful! But — what form will you take?"

She sat back and folded her arms across her chest. "That's a secret. You'll see at the first full moon after the term starts. Minerva reckons I'll be ready by then. I'm afraid I'm not quite as quick about this as you. Good as I am at Transfiguration, the challenge is to also be very aware of one's body, and I'm afraid you've got me beat there, Harry. It's probably one reason why you're a natural flyer and I hate to get any higher than six feet off the ground."

"*Minerva?*"

She smiled. "I'll be going back to 'Professor McGonagall' in September, but during the summer she suggested that we could be a little

more informal. After all, she's a guest in my home. She and Mum get along famously. Oh, and do you know this summer is only the second time I've ever seen her in her Muggle clothes?"

He furrowed his brow. "What's *that* like? And what was the first time?"

"Oh, you know. When she came to our house just after I got my Hogwarts letter. They have to make sure Muggle-borns know it's not some elaborate practical joke, you know. I mean, did you credit it the first time you read your letter?"

"Well — they didn't do it quite the same with me. I think it was assumed that my aunt and uncle had told me about my parents being a witch and a wizard and all that. The letters just kept coming, the address changing each time because Uncle Vernon packed us up and tried to outrun them, until finally Hagrid showed up and started doing magic and handed me the letter and explained to me about my mum and dad — "

"Hagrid? *Doing magic*? It's one thing at Hogwarts, like when he was getting his pumpkins to grow really large... and I didn't really approve of it *then*, but Ron had just been coughing up slugs, and I really didn't want to get into an argument with Hagrid..."

Harry drew his lips together. "I shouldn't have said that —"

"Now you sound like him. He's not *allowed* to do magic, Harry. You and Ron and I know that he shouldn't have been expelled, but technically he hasn't received a full magical education and he isn't a credentialed wizard —"

"Hermione, I know you're Head Girl now, but this is ancient history. He doesn't do much magic, okay? And actually, he was given permission to use magic until he found me. We were talking about you and McGonagall."

So she explained to him that seconds after her Hogwarts letter was dropped in her lap while she was playing in the courtyard at the center of her house, Professor McGonagall had rung the doorbell dressed in a severe plaid skirted suit with a very high-collared blouse. Hermione noticed right away that the brooch she wore at her throat had the same seal as on the envelope she'd just received. McGonagall had introduced herself briskly to Hermione's parents, took a seat without being asked and proceeded to explain to the shocked dentists that their daughter was a witch and had been accepted to Hogwarts.

"How did they take it?"

"About the way most parents of Muggle-borns do, I suppose. They sort of slapped their heads and said, 'That explains so much!' You know; my accidental magic from when I was young. She did a little magic to actually convince them, of course, because there was still the chance that they might think she was putting one over on them."

"What did she do?"

Hermione smiled. "Her favorite trick, of course. The Animagus Transfiguration. I knew then and there that *I* wanted to be able to do *that* some day."

He pulled her to him in a hug. "Oh, Hermione — it would be perfect for you to be with us during the full moon. That's how it *should* be — all three of us together again."

"Here, here, now. What's this? Should I go to get Katie?"

Harry looked up into Ron's face; although he had a light tone to his voice, Harry saw the look behind his eyes. He'd seen him and Hermione embracing and he wondered whether they might be considering getting back together. Even though he was avoiding Hermione, it was still clear how he felt about her.

Harry looked at both of them. "You both *do* realize that it was Katie's dad that fixed us up? It didn't even occur to me to ask her out myself. And I think it took him all of three seconds after that to say, 'My daughter is going out with Harry Potter!' I mean — it's not that I don't like Katie. But we're just trying to date a little — it's not a big deal. Don't make it one, okay? In a few weeks I won't even be living in England, for pete's sake." His voice shook and he wasn't sure whether he was trying to convince them or himself.

Ron laughed. "Take it easy, Harry. Can't you take a joke?"

Harry grimaced. "If one more person asks me that —"

"Anyway", Ron said, interrupting, "I'm out here because Malfoy told me the two of you had been using Dudley's old computer to try to find someone named Margaret Dougherty. Is —" His voice caught. "Is that who I think it is?"

Harry nodded. "I don't know anything yet, though, Ron, so don't get your hopes up. You didn't tell Malfoy who you thought it was, did you?"

"No. Why?"

"Because I didn't tell him either, so unless Ginny's told him, he doesn't know. Not that he can't know, I guess; in fact, there's no reason why he

can't, really. He could even help us get to her if, we find her; he knows how to drive. Maybe Mrs. Figg would let us use her car..."

Hermione frowned. "What?" Harry explained to her that he'd told Ron about his missing sisters.

"You knew?" Ron said to her. "Why didn't *you* tell me?" He sounded as upset now as he had been when Harry had first told him.

"You knew that she knew, Ron. I *told* you. Or did you forget when you decided to attack the wall in the infirmary?"

"What?" Hermione said again, frowning.

"Oh, that was his extremely mature reaction to finding out about his sisters; punch the wall really hard."

"Okay, okay, we've established that I have a temper. This is *news*?" Ron said, running his hand through his hair, making it stand wildly on end. The white lock of hair over his brow that appeared the morning after Remus Lupin bit him stood out amid the red even more when he did this. "I *still* think you could have told me, Hermione", he said, calming down a bit and instead sounding rather hurt. "Why didn't you?" he added, a slightly belligerent edge to his voice again.

"Because — because I thought you would behave exactly the way you are now!" she shot back hotly. "What good would it have done? I didn't know anything useful I could tell you and I knew it would just upset you." She turned to Harry. "How do you know she's going by Margaret Dougherty, by the way?"

He swallowed. "I — I found out last year. Listen — I know I was being very weird all last year — there's a good reason for it and I plan to tell you what that is. But tonight isn't the best time. I'll explain when the term starts. I'll bring my Pensieve with me to school and then I can *show* both of you."

"Your Pensieve? Why a Pensieve?"

He sighed and looked at her sadly. "Because if I couldn't prove it to you with something very concrete, the pair of you would probably have me locked up in St. Mungo's, that's why."

Ron laughed and pulled Harry and Hermione back toward the house; he was so strong it was impossible to resist. "And what makes you think we won't put you in St. Mungo's anyway?"

The three of them entered the house again, laughing, and soon after, Harry disentangled himself, going to the downstairs toilet, but finding the

door locked. He shrugged to himself and bounded up the stairs to use the hall bathroom, but that was also locked. He was about to cut through Mrs. Figg's room to use her en suite bath when he heard voices coming from Draco's room; the door was slightly ajar.

"We can't, Draco! The house is full of people!"

"Come on, Ginny, I can do magic whenever I want now. I can put a silencing charm on —"

"It's not that! I — I just don't feel comfortable —"

"Bloody hell. You NEVER feel comfortable." He sounded bitter.

"That's not fair. If Sprout hadn't interrupted us in the greenhouse —"

"Then you wouldn't still be a virgin and maybe you'd be a little less uptight."

"— then I could be pregnant, since I hadn't had the potion yet. We're lucky she interrupted us before we did something really stupid. And I also don't know how I can ever look her in the face again. She once implied that I'm too good a girl to ever need Prophylaxis Potion, you know that? When she walked in I was mortified. I was in my bra and knickers! And we're lucky it was the end of term and she decided not to give us both enough detentions to last us until we're out of school. As it is, she gave us both more summer Herbology homework than I think I've had in the last five years combined..."

"I don't care about that. Frankly, when she walked in I was tempted to ask her whether she's a voyeur, since stopping that was the closest thing to torture I've experienced since my dad went to Azkaban."

"Stop saying that! I wasn't trying to torture you. I'm not trying to torture you. But we can't do anything right now beyond a little kissing. It's a good thing that we didn't finish what we started in the greenhouse. And frankly, right now I'm not exactly feeling like kissing you."

"Ginny," he said in a wheedling voice. "It's my birthday —"

Before Harry knew what was happening, she had flung open the door, but she stopped short when she saw him standing right outside. She pulled the door shut behind her immediately, turning bright red. Harry thought it might be so that Draco Malfoy wouldn't see him.

"We were just — I mean we weren't — I mean —"

Harry wasn't any less embarrassed. *"I'm — I'm just waiting to use the loo —"* he stammered. She looked like she was still casting about for something to say.

"Erm — why don't you wear your basilisk amulet any more, Harry?" she asked in a brighter voice, trying to pretend that she didn't know perfectly well that he'd heard the conversation between her and Draco Malfoy. She nodded at the space on his chest where the amulet normally would have rested. Harry frowned.

"You don't know?"

"Know what?"

"I gave both of them to Malf — er, Draco. He was supposed to give one to you." He couldn't prevent the blush that came over him then. "You know — you said it was a kind of `couple' thing to do, two people wearing them —"

She looked down and away. "Oh", was the only response he received before she turned and walked down the stairs without looking at him. *Should he have said that?* he wondered, then he looked at the closed bedroom door. *Serves him right.*

Then another thought occurred to him and it made him smile; suddenly his heart felt *much* lighter.

Ginny hadn't slept with Draco Malfoy.

The bathroom door opened abruptly and Katie stepped out. She looked like she'd been crying again and trying to hide it by throwing cold water on her face.

"Oh — Harry. Sorry. I didn't mean to make you wait." She stopped when she saw the expression on his face. "What are you so happy about?"

He couldn't contain himself; he spoke in a hurried whisper. "I just heard — Ginny and Draco didn't — didn't —" Suddenly he stopped and reddened again. "Sorry. You don't want to hear this."

"You mean there's been no shagging?" she said in a hushed voice. "Harry, if I expected you to *not* be happy about that, knowing how you feel about her — well you're not made of stone, are you?" Listening to her soft voice, he suddenly felt like a dreadful cad.

"I'm sorry, Katie. You must hate me now."

She put her finger over his mouth; she was standing very close to him. "We both know each other. Stop apologizing. If you keep that up it just means I'll have to apologize every time Lee crosses my mind in any way. It's all right, Harry. So — it's very important to you that they haven't — you know — is it?"

He swallowed. All this time he'd thought they *had*. Knowing now that they hadn't was very strange. "I — I don't know. I honestly don't know."

* * *

The rest of the party was more enjoyable than Harry thought it would be. He talked to Ron and Hermione about Rodney Jeffries and the milkman, and Hermione got that look on her face that said she was going to start researching something (it was a pity, he thought, that she didn't have access to the Hogwarts library during the summer). She also said she'd find out what she could about anyone in Britain with the name Margaret Dougherty. It felt so *right* to be able to talk to Ron and Hermione this way again, even if they weren't behaving quite naturally with each other. That would take time.

When he returned home from work the next evening, bringing Aberforth and the rest of them back to continue working on the roof, his uncle pulled him aside while the others started putting up ladders. Nigel and Trevor went to the shed to get the new shingles that Harry's uncle had purchased.

"I told you we need to talk, boy", he growled out of the corner of his mouth; now that he knew that Sam and Draco were wizards and Katie a witch, he seemed very nervous about having them working on his house. Harry sighed.

"What do you want to know?"

Vernon jerked his head at the lot of them. "Are they all — all —"

"— like me?" His uncle nodded. "No. You know about Katie and her dad, and about Draco. Nigel and Trevor aren't, and they don't know about the rest of us. And Dick —" Harry hesitated. "Well, he's not Muggle either. He's Aberforth Dumbledore, my headmaster's brother. And before you lose it, he *likes* living in the Muggle world, and so does Sam. They may be — like me — but they work hard for a living like any non-magical person. Aberforth and Sam, well — there's a lot of people in the wizarding world who don't like them, and whom they don't like. It's rather mutual. They do this by choice."

Vernon Dursley surveyed the work with a suspicious expression, uncertain whether to trust Harry's words. "And Figg?"

"What about her?"

"Who else knows about her?"

"No Muggles know about her but you and Aunt Petunia. She goes to church, does her shopping, takes her daily constitutional down to the park in the afternoon, she has a bunch of cats, watches the telly in the evening... Perfectly normal old woman."

Uncle Vernon looked like he wanted to argue about this, but suddenly his wife came striding out the front door, dressed in a smart skirted suit and looking very determined. Her husband sputtered, "P-petunia! Where are you going, my sweet?"

"Down to the village. Poor Agnes Bringham has twisted her ankle and I'm going to help her with her tea and pick up her house for her a little. I shall be back by ten. The pair of you can manage your own tea, I presume? I bought sausages today." She didn't wait for an answer, but strode off down Privet Lane.

Harry frowned. Since when did Aunt Petunia like Agnes Bringham? Or go out in the evening? Had someone taken Polyjuice Potion to look like his aunt? he wondered. He saw that his uncle was as puzzled as he was. Vernon Dursley seemed to have forgotten that he was speaking to Harry about something important and instead wandered into his house in a daze, closing the door quietly behind him.

Harry felt he was on edge all of the time now; at home, his aunt and uncle were doing a cautious kind of dance around each other, and every evening, his aunt went out, claiming that she was visiting Agnes Bringham. His uncle did his best to avoid any of them when they came to work on the roof in the early evening. Thank goodness we're almost done, Harry thought.

At work, he was on edge for a different reason. He found himself being more and more sensitive to the times when it seemed Draco Malfoy and Felice Harrington-Smyth might be alone together, although he had no idea what he would do if he caught them *in flagrante*. Finally, on Friday, when most of them were lounging on the grass after lunch, soaking up the anemic mid-day sun, Harry happened to sit up to slap a bug on his leg and saw the two of them enter the hedge maze, looking around surreptitiously.

Katie was lying back on the grass to his left. He tapped her shoulder and pointed at the maze. He mouthed the names *Draco* and *Felice*. Harry rose and crept toward the maze, Katie right behind him. When they were in the maze, the tall hedges seemed to shut out the noise of the outside world. They moved further and further toward the interior, and eventually

they heard an unmistakable noise: a human being moaning in passion. Katie's eyes opened wide.

"Why, that *bastard*", she breathed.

"That's my line", Harry said grimly. They heard the girl's cries keening higher and higher; he remembered hearing Niamh Quirke and Draco Malfoy in the Hogwarts library in his other life and wished Malfoy could have at least found a *quiet* girl to shag, like Niamh — *No, wait*, he thought. *He's not supposed to be shagging anyone*. He put his hand on Katie's arm and started pulling her back the way they'd come. She actually looked a little glazed-over.

"Wow", she said; it seemed to pop out of her mouth against her will. "She really — um — seems to be enjoying herself —"

He raised one eyebrow. "Thinking of going after him yourself now? I thought he was a bastard."

"Oh, he's still that", she said musingly, looking over her shoulder for a moment. Then she looked irritated with herself. "He's *definitely* that. Poor Ginny! What will she say when she finds out? What will she do?"

Harry stood looking at the maze grimly. Thankfully, now that they were outside its enveloping walls they could no longer hear the amorous couple. "Who says she's going to find out?" he heard himself saying.

"What?"

"I said —"

"I heard what you said. I just thought — I thought you'd *enjoy* telling her about this. This could be your chance, after all."

"You thought I'd enjoy hurting her like this? And why should she credit anything I have to say about him anyway? It's not like I have any ulterior motives — Oh, wait. *That's* right — I *do*. If Ginny knew about this — well, I just hate to think how she'd feel —"

Katie's mouth was very thin. "I don't know Harry. This could really come back to haunt you. What if she finds out eventually *and* also finds out that you knew? You won't exactly be her favorite person. If you tell her yourself, you might stand a chance with her."

He swallowed. "Listen, I told him if he hurts her he'll have me to answer to. I meant that. I'll talk to him about this. Maybe — maybe they weren't really —"

"Oh, come *on*, Harry. You know as well as I do what those sounds meant. Don't try to delude yourself."

He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes; he felt very tired suddenly. "I have to *think*. I can't decide this very second."

But suddenly, Draco and Felice came out of the maze and plowed right into Harry and Katie. Harry whirled, unable to stop himself from glaring at Draco Malfoy, who had a very silly grin on his face and a shirt that was wrong-side-out. When he saw Harry's face, his grin slowly faded.

"*We need to talk*," Harry said simply. He saw the blond boy swallow. Felice ignored Harry and Katie, walking up toward the house as though she hadn't a care in the world; Harry noticed that there were numerous twigs and leaves attached to the back of her skirt and cardigan, and she was walking with that swaying-hip movement that Katie had had when she walked away from Rodney Jeffries' tent after they were discovered. He dragged Draco Malfoy into the maze again, trying to control his temper.

"*What do you think you're doing?*" Harry hissed at him.

Draco Malfoy didn't wipe the self-satisfied smile off his face. "What do you think I think I'm doing?" he said cockily.

"I thought you loved Ginny!" he said, tightening his grip on Draco's arm. He struggled to get loose, unsuccessfully, and stopped, going limp. His mouth was clamped shut obstinately. "Just because she said she's glad Sprout interrupted you in the greenhouse —"

Draco Malfoy jerked his head up. "You were eavesdropping on us! You sneaky —"

"Oh, it's not as though it was difficult! I was just waiting for the loo. Sometimes you are so incredibly, colossally *stupid* it's painfully obvious why you wound up in Slytherin. You don't have the brains for Ravenclaw, you're certainly not brave enough for Gryffindor, the way you sneak around, and you don't work nearly hard enough for Hufflepuff — let *alone* having enough *loyalty* not to be shagging some other girl just because you can't respect that Ginny's not ready —"

"My relationship with Ginny is *none of your damn business*," he said through clenched teeth, his arm still firmly in Harry's grip, which was tightening. Harry saw him wince. He was glad.

"I've *made* it my business, Malfoy. I told you that if you hurt her, you'll have me to answer to. I mean, I didn't know for sure about you and Mariah Kirkner, but this —"

Draco looked shaken. "What about me and Mariah?"

"Don't you remember when Ginny came looking for you in the Trophy Room because she found that note you gave Mariah? Why *were* you meeting her, really?"

"None of your business. Did — did Ginny know about that?" His voice shook.

"No. Like I said, I didn't want her to be hurt." Suddenly Harry realized that he'd kept this from Ginny for months, and there'd been no repercussions.

Draco seemed to have forgotten the hand gripping his arm now. He suddenly looked more smug than Harry had ever seen him. "And who will *you* answer to for hurting her, eh? That dog that passes for your best friend? That howling thing that you evidently *want* to be shagging Granger?"

"What are you talking about? You're the one hurting her —"

"Only if she finds out."

Harry stopped cold. "What?" It was eerie. Had Malfoy heard what he'd been saying to Katie?

"I said only if she finds out. If you don't tell her, she doesn't get hurt."

Harry stepped back from him, his face contorted in disgust; now that Draco Malfoy was suggesting it, he heard how vile it sounded. "You expect me to keep this a *secret*?"

There was that smirk again, the one Harry wanted to hex right off his face. "You kept Mariah a secret."

"I didn't really know anything about Mariah. Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

He snorted. "Not bloody likely. But tell me, Harry, what do you think she would do if you told her? About Felice, I mean."

"Dump you like a load of dung."

"Wrong. She'd think you were making it up to try to break us up, *that's* what." He paused, his lips drawn very thin. "You think I don't see how you look at her? You think I haven't been able to figure out that you want her? I'll bet she knows, too. She would just think it's a Draco smear campaign. She's heard enough bad things about me — true and false — to last a lifetime. You tell her this and she either believes you and is hurt — which you say you don't want — or she doesn't believe you and you look bad. Take your pick. It's lose-lose for you and win-win for me."

Harry clenched and unclenched his fists by his sides. "So you think you can just get away with this?"

Draco looked exasperated. "It's not — listen, I'm going to tell you the unvarnished truth, and this goes no further, understand? This will *help* my relationship with Ginny. I've been going mad! And I don't like pressuring her, but — well, you know how it is. Men have needs."

"So are you saying Mariah wasn't seeing to your needs? And we can discuss whether you're a man or a child some other time."

"Shut up. I'm talking now. Mariah — yeah, she offered to, um, help." He ran his hand through his hair. "Saying no to her was — incredibly difficult. So, here I've been for almost a year, tempted and saying no, and then... I didn't plan this whole thing with Felice. I don't even like her. She's a Muggle, she yaps too much and she thinks far too much of herself. Reminds me of Pansy without the magical powers, except Pansy was a cold fish."

"Yeah, well, if Pansy Parkinson had the good taste not to shag you, I have a whole new respect for her."

"Shut up. I probably should have just gone ahead with Mariah, then Ginny and I would have avoided a slew of rows this year. This will take the pressure off me and Ginny. I can be the model boyfriend when I'm around her, let her take her time, do — things — when she's ready. Isn't that better than pressuring her?"

Harry shook his head. "The model boyfriend. Yeah, I'm sure all model boyfriends are shagging girls who aren't their girlfriends. Are you *listening* to yourself? I'll say one thing for you, Malfoy, you're a master of rationalization. You've managed to convince yourself that Ginny will be *glad* you're cheating on her. Bravo. Sounds like you shouldn't have nipped that little Death Eater career in the bud; you're obviously perfect for the job."

Harry turned and strode out of the maze, unable to see straight. It was time to get back to work; he followed Aberforth to the van and started to help him move sacks of fertilizer. As he worked, he thought with satisfaction that once he told Ginny about Malfoy and the Harrington-Smyth girl, that would be the end of them. No more Ginny-and-Draco. Then he stopped. What if — what if she saw it the same way Draco did? As something that was welcome because she wasn't ready yet and was

tired of him pressuring her? What if she became angry with *him*, Harry, for meddling?

He paused for a moment in his work before continuing. *I won't let that happen*, he thought. *I'll convince her she should break up with him...*

Then he thought of Ron telling him to break up with Hermione and also telling Hermione to break up with him. That had gotten her pretty hacked off at Ron. What if Ginny became hacked off at *him*? And now Ron and Hermione weren't exactly together anyway. What if I do all this and she becomes — he shuddered for a moment — *Neville Longbottom's girlfriend*?

Then there was the matter of still being targeted by Voldemort. Should he be asking *any* girl to be his girlfriend right now? he thought. He glanced at Katie, who was pruning a rose bush. *Am I putting poor Katie at risk every time we go out?*

He threw himself into his work that afternoon, irked with himself for ever trusting Draco Malfoy. He thought of the boy who'd been his best friend in his other life. Now that Harry thought about it, Draco Malfoy had done very nearly the same thing in that life. He *was* technically the same person. He'd been involved with loads of girls before he admitted to Jamie how he felt about her, and according to him, he'd felt that way about her even while he was shagging those other girls. The problem was — he'd fallen for a girl who was two years younger than he was. So he found a way to "occupy" himself while he waited for her to reach her fifteenth birthday. Now Harry remembered furiously that *on* Jamie's fifteenth birthday they were going to sleep together, and probably would have, if she hadn't been so upset about her brother killing her mother. *He couldn't wait*, he grumbled to himself. *Just like on Ginny's fifteenth birthday...*

He shoveled manure onto the flower beds, frowning angrily. Why hadn't this behavior seemed so reprehensible when he'd been friends with Draco Malfoy for years? Had he simply grown inured to Malfoy's unique brand of rationalization? For once he didn't need to convince himself that the two boys were one and the same — it was very clear to him that they were. He simply had a much lower opinion now of his best friend from his other life. He'd learned in recent years to trust Severus Snape's opinion of people, and he recalled his stepfather's venomous reaction to finding out that Draco Malfoy was Jamie's boyfriend...

Later in the day, they were washing up in the scullery in the big house, using two deep adjacent sinks, when Draco Malfoy tried to talk to him again. "Listen, Harry — if I don't do anything with Felice again — does Ginny have to know? I mean — haven't you ever done something like that out of weakness?"

He looked uncharacteristically scared and vulnerable. Harry suddenly had a very vivid picture of a very pretty Alicia Spinnett kissing him, and him kissing her back... He turned off the water and dried his hands on an old linen towel. "The main thing is I don't want her to get hurt, Malfoy. If you keep this up, she's liable to find out sooner or later, whether I tell her or not. You'll slip up and do something stupid, like call her the wrong name —"

"I'm not Weasley."

"Call him Ron, you prat. He's Ginny's brother."

"Well you seem to have stopped calling me Draco, *Potter*."

Harry sighed. "As I was *saying*, the main thing is for her not to be hurt. If you stop seeing Felice, it's possible Ginny won't find out. Can you guarantee me that you'll definitely stop?"

He held up his hand. "I promise." Harry grimaced, wondering how reliable a Draco Malfoy promise was.

"If I think I see you slipping, I'll step in. Understand? I'm not going to let you hurt Ginny." Harry suddenly wondered whether his poor sister would have had her heart broken by Draco Malfoy if their world hadn't started to self-destruct.

"Right. You'll step in. What, you looking for a little rich-girl action yourself? Mind, you'll have to turn your hearing off to tolerate her for more than a few minutes..."

"No, I do *not* want her myself. If she's really that interested in taking up with a gardener maybe Trevor or Nigel can fight over her. I just want to make sure you behave yourself."

"At least until you move to Scotland."

Harry stopped suddenly. Oh, right — he wasn't going to be working with the lads after his birthday. "Well then — Katie will keep an eye on you. She doesn't want Ginny to be hurt either."

"No, she doesn't want me and Ginny to break up because she knows that if we do *you'll* try to swoop in and claim Ginny for yourself."

"Shut up. Katie and I are friends. She's not a jealous harpy."

"Unlike Granger —"

"I said *shut up*", Harry repeated, pushing Draco into the wall. "You do not talk about Hermione, understand?"

"Well, Weasley — I mean *Ron* doesn't seem to be interested in shagging her, and you've stopped because evidently shagging her interferes with you letting my girlfriend know you're available. I've become so desperate I've already stooped to being with a Muggle, so a Mudblood would actually be a move up for me. Until Ginny's ready, maybe Granger and I could — *oof!*"

Harry hadn't been able to control himself any longer; he had punched Draco Malfoy in the stomach as hard as he could. The blond boy sank to his knees, his arms around his middle, biting his lip. Harry would have liked for him to cry out, but he knew Malfoy had too much pride for that. Still on his knees, he looked up at Harry, speaking in a low hiss.

"Wondered how long it would take you to do something like that", he managed to say, panting. "Feel better now? Got it out of your system? Because I *could* tell Ginny you punched me if you threaten to tell her about Felice."

"You can't blackmail me, Malfoy. I'm not hiding anything from Ginny. You're the one doing that. Mariah *and* Felice."

"Oh, yeah, you're not hiding anything about you and little Miss Katie, eh? You two haven't snogged *once*? You haven't had any naughty thoughts about her at all? Everything strictly platonic? You're all over me for getting some relief while Ginny decides whether to be a lifelong virgin, but you're not above getting some relief yourself."

"She isn't *my* girlfriend — she's *yours*. And that's *not* what I'm doing!" he sputtered.

"Still — if you don't think Ginny would be upset about you hitting me, just try her. Tell her you hit me, see how popular it makes you with her. I'm betting you won't get shagged any more than I have."

"Stop talking about her that way!" Harry shouted at him. Draco Malfoy grimaced.

"I didn't mean — that came out badly. I meant —"

"I know, I know. Shut up. Let me think." He paced the small room, running his fingers through his hair. At last he turned to Draco Malfoy. "All right. Here's how it is. You stop seeing Felice. I make sure there's no danger of you backsliding. Ginny doesn't find out from me that this

happened. That's all I can say. If she finds out some other way, you're on your own."

"How else would she —" Draco started to say before the answer dawned on him. "Katie."

Harry shrugged. "I'm not her keeper. You never know, Katie *could* tell her. It's possible. Women stick together. On the other hand, maybe she's the last person who would want Ginny to be available." As soon as he said it, he had the urge to bite back the words.

Draco Malfoy smirked. "So, it's platonic, is it?"

"Shut up. We're not talking about my personal life, we're talking about yours. You're going to be a good boy from now on, understand?"

"Yes, nanny", he simpered. He sauntered out of the scullery looking carefree and content. Harry, on the other hand, couldn't fight the feeling that he'd been had.

Why do I get the feeling that Felice Harrington-Smyth wasn't the only one in this house who was screwed today? he thought.

* * *

The work on the roof was completed on Thursday night. When Harry awoke on Friday morning to go running, he stood across the street first, contentedly taking in the sight of the new shingles. Something about finishing the roof felt even more satisfying than the landscaping he was doing for Aberforth. *Maybe if I weren't a wizard, I would have been a carpenter.* He'd once thought that outdoor work seemed very satisfying, and frequently, housebuilding or carpentry meant working out-of-doors. He sighed. That didn't exactly help him to decide what he was going to do when he was out of school — an event which was now only one year away. *Are there wizard carpenters?* he wondered.

He and Draco Malfoy had been running together in utter silence since he'd discovered him in the hedge maze with Felice Harrington-Smyth. (He kept up running with him because he didn't want to deal with Dunkirk by himself in the mornings.) Harry tried to avoid even looking at him. At work, he spoke to him only when it was absolutely necessary, mostly engaging in conversation with Sam, Katie and Aberforth; Draco mostly socialized with Nigel and Trevor (whom Harry was avoiding because of their constant lascivious comments about him and Katie).

When the day was almost over and they were cleaning up, Harry said to Katie, "What are you doing tonight?" He'd found it very difficult to get

Ginny out of his mind after the Draco-Felice incident, but whereas he previously had found his mind wandering into romantic fantasy territory, these days it was almost always nightmares — imagining her horrible reaction to Draco's cheating. He thought perhaps it would help to spend the evening with Katie.

Katie hemmed and hawed for a moment before saying, "Actually — I'm going up to Hogsmeade. I'm spending the weekend at Hog's End." She blushed furiously.

"Oh."

"I'm sorry, Harry. I feel like — like I need to do this. To face this. I need to try to be around all of them and still feel *normal*." She paused before going on. "Angelina says Lee has a new girlfriend", she said softly.

"Oh, Katie — are you sure you want to go? It doesn't sound like it'll be easy —"

She smiled at him. "You're very sweet, Harry. You're actually making me think you might miss me."

He suddenly thought he might like to kiss her, but decided that Trevor and Nigel (who were nearby) would have far too much fun with that. "I *will* miss you."

She looked at him for a long minute, then shook herself. "I'll — I'll be back Sunday night. Maybe we can do something then?"

"All right. It's a date."

"A date", she confirmed, still looking at him. He watched her walk toward her father's car, a dreadful feeling clutching at him; he just hoped that she wouldn't be a basket-case when she returned from Hogsmeade. He wasn't sure how he felt about her, but he did know that he didn't want her to be hurt any more than Ginny.

* * *

When he was walking Dunkirk after work, he took him down to the park, wondering what he would do with himself that evening, now that the roof was done. He almost felt tempted to go find out whether Draco Malfoy wanted to do something, but he quickly eliminated that as a possibility.

The large tent still loomed over the park landscape like a white whale. Suddenly, Harry had an idea; he would go to hear Jeffries, find out exactly what he was up to. But then he frowned; going alone didn't appeal to him. He looked up at the evening sky and his eyes lit immediately on the spire of St. Bede's in the Meadow. He walked purposefully toward the church,

Dunkirk fighting him the whole way because he knew this was *not* the way home.

"Stupid dog", Harry muttered as he dragged him to the vicarage, digging in his heels and resisting the urge to growl back at him. (He definitely could *not* change into a golden griffin in the middle of the village just to frighten the terrier.) Struggling to keep the dog under control, he knocked on the door.

After a few moments, Mr. Babcock opened the door. *He looks like a normal person*, Harry thought; then he was annoyed with himself for thinking it. *Of course he's a normal person*. He was wearing a simple white button-down shirt and *jeans*. Harry tried not to stare. He also seemed to have the same sort of running shoes as Harry.

"Um — hello. I hope I'm not disturbing you", he said to the obviously-surprised vicar.

"No, not at all", Mr. Babcock smiled. "Do come in."

"Well —" Harry started to say, looking down at Dunkirk. "Let me tie up the dog. Trust me; you do *not* want him in your house."

Mr. Babcock waited while Harry tied Dunkirk's lead to the rail for his front steps. In the sitting room, he discovered Dr. Forbes sitting at a chessboard, staring intently at it, frowning. He glanced up, then down again; then he did a double take.

"Harry! What brings you here?"

"Well — I wanted to see if Mr. Babcock would like to come check out Rodney Jeffries tonight. I still haven't had a chance to find out what he does; and you", he nodded at the vicar, "said you were curious as well. I can pay for you. Think of it as a contribution to the church."

Mr. Babcock's eyebrows flew up in surprise. "A teenager who doesn't have anything better to do on a Friday night but treat his vicar to a show by the local charlatan?"

"Well — I'd go with my girlfriend, but she's up in Scotland this weekend visiting some old friends from school. And I didn't want to go alone."

"What about that boy who was at mass with you last week — Drake-something-or-other —"

Harry shrugged. "We're not terribly good friends, really. And I don't think he cares about this or is curious. You are, and I am too, so I thought —"

Dr. Forbes stood. "Well, actually that makes three of us curious about this Jeffries, so why don't I join you?" He put his hand on Harry's shoulder and smiled. "I can pay my own way, though, Harry."

He smiled at the doctor. "All right, then. I have to take my aunt's dog home and change my clothes. I'll meet you in the park in an hour."

When Harry was passing the park again, Dunkirk started acting strangely. He raised his nose and sniffed the air and wouldn't come when Harry pulled on the lead. "Come *on* you infuriating animal", he grunted at it, then suddenly found himself being jerked across the green to a stand of trees with benches scattered in their shade and some kind of creeper for a groundcover around the roots. Draco Malfoy had been dragged over to these trees during the morning run, Harry remembered, and he'd had a hell of a time getting the dog to come away again (which was odd, because Dunkirk generally obeyed Malfoy). Dunkirk stopped and sat down suddenly, then barked three times, looking (Harry thought) at the trees. Harry frowned. What on earth was Dunkirk doing?

Then Harry heard the voice.

"*Harry Potter.*"

He froze. His heart was thumping painfully. When he finally spoke, his voice came out in a soft hiss.

"*Sandy?*"

As the small green snake slithered out from under the vines, Harry fought the urge to shout and leap for joy. "Is it really you, Sandy?" he asked breathlessly.

"I have been looking for you, Harry Potter. You have need of me."

"How do you know?"

"I was captured and living in the London zoo for a time. I met a friend of yours, a python whom you once freed."

"Oh — they got him back?"

"Evidently. He is a very large snake, and he has great Sight. The things of which he spoke... They concerned you. He is able to see farther into the future than I, and his Sight reaches farther afield as well. I knew I had to find you. So I escaped and made my way down here to see you."

"What — what are these things that he told you?"

"He saw you fighting spiders of a monstrous size, and flames, and humans riding tree branches with bundles of twigs on the ends..."

"Brooms. Wait — *when* did he predict these things, exactly? How long have you been traveling?"

"He predicted them on the day when the light and dark are equal."

"You mean the equinox? In March?"

"Is that what humans call it? I have been trying to find you ever since then. I was unsure how soon these events would be occurring, but I knew that you would be arriving in this part of the country soon after the longest day."

"Midsummer. That's in June. That was three weeks ago. I think — I think what you're describing was what happened about three weeks into May. That was about two months after the prediction. There was a battle in the forest at Hogwarts, and we *were* fighting giant spiders, and there was a huge fire in the forest, too. But almost everyone came out of it all right. So you've been traveling since *March*?"

"Yes."

Sandy was silent, and oddly, so was Dunkirk. Harry was very interested to see that the small dog, usually very agitated and disobedient around him, was sitting quite still, watching the snake with his head cocked to one side, as though he could also understand Sandy.

"Sandy?" Harry said again.

"Yes, Harry Potter?"

"Do you — do you want to be my companion again? I have a feeling — I just have a feeling that a lot of things are going to be happening soon..."

"I think that would be wise", she answered. Harry couldn't remember when he'd felt so glad about anything as he knelt down and picked her up; he let her slither into the collar of his shirt and felt her wrap herself around his upper arm. The familiar weight there was comforting.

When he called to Dunkirk and pulled gently at his lead, suddenly the dog started trotting after him docilely, as though he always obeyed Harry and was the model pet. Harry frowned as he walked back to Privet Drive, unsure what to make of this.

* * *

When he returned to the park to meet the vicar and the doctor, there was already a long queue for tickets. Harry bought two, handing one to the vicar, while Dr. Forbes bought one for himself. They found seats about half-way back and sat, waiting for the show to begin. There were footlights

in front of the dais, throwing crazy shadows onto the canvas ceiling of the tent. The choir was already assembled on the platform, a good two dozen people or so. Harry could feel Sandy under his shirt, as much a part of him as though she'd never left.

"*That's our star tenor!*" Babcock hissed at Harry, pointing, but Harry wasn't sure who he meant. The singers all looked freshly-scrubbed and gleaming, wearing immaculate white robes like a host of angels. Harry was starting to feel very uneasy. What if Jeffries was just an old-fashioned hellfire-and-brimstone preacher? He wasn't interested in that sort of thing himself, but he didn't necessarily think other people were suspicious or up to no good just because *they* were.

Mr. Babcock sighed. "If only I could use Bingo to raise money, like Father Garrison, over at St. Ignatius. It's something of a gentleman's agreement, though, you understand, that we don't poach on their territory, so to speak. Some of our parish members go over to St. Ignatius for Bingo, and when we have our Spring Jumble Sale, the St. Ignatius parishioners come to St. Bede's. Hardly seems fair, though", he mused, craning his neck to see the front. "Ours is only once a year, not once a week..."

Harry wasn't sure when it started, but he was suddenly aware of there being a low rhythmic rumble, and he realized it was coming from the choir. *BUM* (ba-da-da *bum bum bum bum*.) *BUM* (ba-da-da *bum bum bum*...)

"*To dream the impossible dream*," began a young man with a smooth tenor voice — must be Mr. Babcock's tenor, Harry thought. "*To fight the unbeatable foe...*"

The choir started *aahing* and *oohing* to accompany him, and then a baritone joined the tenor.

"*To bear with unbearable sorrow*," they sang together. "*To run where the brave dare not go...*"

"*To right*," the entire choir sang now, harmonizing in a medium volume; "*the unrightable wrong; to love, pure and chaste, from afar; to try, when your arms are too weary, to reach the unreachable star!*"

Harry could see the audience getting caught up in the music as the voices swelled and broadened. "*This is my quest*," the choir sang more loudly now; "*to follow that star, no matter how hopeless, no matter how far...*"

Just the men sang, "*To fight for the right without question or pause, to be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause!*"

"*And I know*", the full choir sang again, more softly, "*if I'll only be true to this glorious quest, that my heart will lie peaceful and calm, when I'm laid to my rest...*" They softened further on this phrase, and Harry shivered involuntarily, both because of how effective this was, and because of the meaning of the words they were singing.

"*And the world*," they continued, growing in volume again, "*will be better for this; that one man, scorned and covered with scars, still strove with his last ounce of courage...*" They swelled still more. "*To reach the unreachable stars, that one man scorned and covered with scars, still strove with his last ounce of courage...*" The crescendo was constant now, each note louder than the previous one, the tent filled with the sound, the faces of the audience glowing with rapture as they listened — *No*, Harry thought; as they *absorbed* the music, as they made it part of themselves...

"*To reach the unreachable stars!*" most of the choir finished, holding the final note with a triumphant crescendo, while some of the women with very high voices repeated, "*The unreachable stars!*" going up the scale, the notes' vibrations making the hairs stand up on the back of Harry's neck. He looked around the room, seeing the effect the music was having on everyone present (even Babcock and Forbes), and he suddenly wished he had a wand with him to cast the *Revelatio* spell, to learn whether he would again see pink magical signatures that had the appearance of each and every audience member.

He remembered the Hermione in his other life describing the phenomenon when she and the rest of the student orchestra in Philadelphia that had been playing Barber's *Adagio for Strings* had spontaneously floated up into the air. Hermione being a witch and feeling very, very emotionally moved by the incident had obviously had an effect, but Harry now had to wonder whether *anyone*, magical or Muggle, could experience something similar when listening to or making music in a crowd, the collective emotions somehow producing a kind of primitive wandless magic. He remembered Dumbledore saying, "*Ah, music; a magic beyond all we do here*," after the students had sung the school song, each to their own favorite tune. Harry wouldn't exactly have described that cacophony as "music", but he was starting to wonder at music's potential magical properties. Were there any spells that needed to be *sung*? he wondered.

The choir held the final chord, it seemed to him, for a very long time, and suddenly a slit appeared in the tent behind the singers and they parted into two groups (still holding the note) while Rodney Jeffries himself entered down the aisle they had created, wearing a simple button-down shirt and dark trousers, his face tanned and smiling as he waved to the audience, which went wild now, clapping and stamping, many of them standing up, some people whistling. The choir finally finished, and then they too were clapping — but not for themselves. It was all for Rodney Jeffries. The ovation was deafening. Harry thought ruefully, Mr. Babcock was right; he *does* put on a good show. And he'd just arrived.

He jumped nimbly down from the dais and started walking down the passage between the chairs, shaking hands with the members of his enthusiastic audience that he could reach from the aisle. Some women threw their arms around his neck and tried to kiss him; Harry noticed that he managed to turn his cheek each time. After a few minutes, he retreated to the dais and stepped up onto the raised surface again, so that they could see him more easily. Rodney Jeffries beamed around at the cheering crowd and finally spoke.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen!" he said, and Harry could hear that there was an amplification system carrying his voice to the far corners of the tent, although he didn't appear to be using a microphone; he could be heard even over the loud applause and cheering. "Good evening!" he said again, as the ruckus began slowly to abate. Little by little, people sat again. (Harry, Babcock and Forbes had remained seated.)

"Good evening, one and all!" Jeffries said, showing a lot of gleaming teeth when he grinned. "It is gratifying to see so many people returning! I hope you have found my techniques for self-empowerment helpful in changing your lives for the better!"

"*We love you, Rodney!*" cried a woman shrilly on the far side of the tent from Harry, and the cheering and clapping started up again. This time, Jeffries held his hands out, as though pushing down the sound, and it finally quieted. While he did this, he never left off grinning.

"And *I* love all of *you*! That is *precisely* why I could not keep my good fortune to myself, why I had to share this with the world! How could I be so selfish not to teach other people how to empower themselves, how to truly *change* their *lives*? Rod, I said to myself, you *cannot* be so selfish. It just *would* not be right!"

There was silence, as the crowd took in his words. Then a man's voice from the back cried, "*Tell the story!*"

"Yes, yes, *tell it, tell it,*" several more voices joined in the chorus. Harry realized that not only did people pay twenty pounds per person to come hear him, some had clearly been multiple times — some perhaps even every time. As the requests for Jeffries to "tell the story" grew more loud and numerous, he nodded good-naturedly and put his hands up, nodding.

"Yes, yes, of course I'll tell the story. Those of you who have already heard it, please be patient and let those who have not heard it do so." Harry thought it was unnecessary for him to say this, since it was clearly the people who'd heard it already who were clamoring to hear it again.

"As many of you know, I had a life like many people in this country. It was boring and stale and lonely. I had a job clerking in a law office —" Harry remembered the man named Adam Justice, who had found him and Katie; perhaps they were former co-workers. "I had a girlfriend for a while, and then we parted ways. I had a cat. A comfortable flat. I paid my bills, I did my laundry and cleaned my flat. I had a good life, but it was hardly a special one. If I no longer worked at the law practice, some other clerk would be hired to replace me. If I no longer leased my flat, the landlord would surely be able to find someone else to do it. I avoided the truth of my existence, day in and day out. The truth being — that if I disappeared off the face of the planet, *no one would notice or care.*"

His voice had grown softer, yet not a muscle moved, and every breath seemed suspended as the crowd waited for him to continue.

"*And then*", he said suddenly, urgently. "*Then it happened.*" Harry saw that several people near him were shivering in anticipation, clearly knowing what was coming next. "I was waiting to take the tube home one evening, standing on the platform, reading my newspaper, when suddenly I looked up — and I saw *him.*"

A collective gasp from the audience. Harry looked around, frowning. Who had Jeffries seen?

"He appeared to be the devil incarnate. His face — I'd never seen a face like it. Squashed nose, slit for a mouth, deathly pale skin. Perhaps he was Death himself, I thought when I saw him. And then he looked right at me, and I saw *his eyes*. Red as blood, more evil-looking than any depiction of Satan I had ever seen.

"And then —" he said again, pausing for effect. "He raised his hand and pointed at me, and a crackling green light shot from his fingers like lightening bolts and struck me in the chest. I experienced greater pain than I ever imagined was possible, like knives piercing every part of my body —"

Harry winced. *Voldemort!* Jeffries had seen Voldemort, and had experienced *Cruciatus*! He was starting to think all of this almost made sense now. *Jeffries had a near-death experience, and now that he's recovered from it, he's turned over a new leaf. It doesn't happen for everyone, but it does happen to some people who go through that.*

Now Harry actually felt eager to hear the rest of the story. He felt sorry that Jeffries had had to experience the pain of *Cruciatus*, but clearly his life *had* greatly improved after that. He wondered whether Voldemort realized that he'd inadvertently done this for a mere Muggle, and how upset he would be if he knew.

"— and then, even in the midst of my pain, I felt something strange start to flow through me. A change. He raised his hand again, and I was no longer in pain, but I felt — I felt as though I was using *all of my brain*. Now, hear me out! Many of you may have heard that there are actually large parts of the brain that humans do not use, yes? Many of you have heard this?"

Scores of people in the audience nodded in agreement and murmured in a low rumble that took a minute to die out; when a respectful silence was restored, Jeffries continued. Well, after that I felt like I was using *all of it*. Every last cell and neuron! I felt as though I could *see* more, *hear* more! I felt more alive than ever before in my existence!

"And then —" he said yet again, and now Harry and even Babcock and Forbes, along with the rest of the crowd, were hanging on his every word. "And then", he repeated, "another crackling beam of light emerged from that demon's hand, and the Westminster tube station *exploded into a million pieces!*"

Westminster! Harry gasped involuntarily, then felt himself color when Babcock looked sideways at him in surprise. So Voldemort hadn't simply been lurking in some other tube station and putting *Cruciatus* on unsuspecting law clerks; Rodney Jeffries had been caught in *the* explosion, the now-infamous Westminster Bombing. Harry was floored. The

explosion had been to get *his* attention. He, Harry, was in a way as responsible as Voldemort for the Rodney Jeffries Phenomenon.

"I, like many other people waiting on that platform, was covered in rubble falling from the ceiling of the station. I was unconscious for a time; when I awoke, I was aware of voices in the distance. Rescue workers. I tried to open my eyes and couldn't. I am not ashamed to say that I felt like crying. I had felt more alive than ever before for mere seconds before the explosion, and I did not know whether I would be saved or whether I would perish under the rubble while waiting. I felt an *anger* well up in me, then, and as it grew, I suddenly became aware of the load above me lightening, until suddenly the beam and concrete that had been pressing me to the platform *flew up into the air*. I was able to rise! I felt all of my limbs; I was evidently unharmed, if more than a bit dusty. I could hear the sounds of suffering people all around me, and I began to move more of the rubble out of the way to remove these poor people from danger. Heavy beams I should never have been able to lift under normal circumstances virtually flew off men and women and children at a *thought* from me, and although I was so glad to help them that I was moved to tears, I was also very, very frightened of what this new ability might mean.

"When the rescue workers were cataloguing the names of those who'd been in the station at the time of the attack, I hid my wallet and gave a false name, claiming that I had lost my identification in the explosion. When I had been given a clean bill of health, I bolted for home, unsure whether I should trust my memory of what had occurred. Had I imagined everything but the explosion? Had the demon been a figment of my imagination? I hadn't dared to tell anyone what I'd seen — they probably would have thought I was mad. I wasn't entirely sure about that myself. What had *really* occurred? I wondered.

"I hid in my flat and did not go out for a week. I was fired from my job. A friend from work came to see me and said that he had convinced our bosses to take me back if I went to the office on Monday morning. I did, and I was immediately employed again. I returned to my job, but I was just going through the motions. At home, every night, I began to experiment with my newfound power. I could burn myself on the stove and heal myself almost instantly, with a thought. I could cut myself, and the cuts disappeared if I just *believed* they would be. Over time, I discovered

that if I did not *truly* believe that something I was attempting would work, it in fact *did not work*."

He paused, staring out into the crowd. "Belief. Many of us believe in many different types of things. Gods. Philosophies. Scientific phenomena and theories. Diets. Exercise regimes. Some of us still believe in heroes, and in the likelihood that the person who receives the Nobel Peace Prize will actually be a person who deserves it. We believe in superstitions; we carry umbrellas to ward off rain, we read our horoscopes in the papers, we avoid walking under ladders and we throw salt over our shoulders when we spill it. We believe in many, many things. But how many of us can *truly* claim to believe in *ourselves*?"

He looked out at the crowd, now so silent that it was as though everyone present had been stunned. Harry too was waiting to hear more. *Had Jeffries been made a wizard by Voldemort?* he wondered. Was that even *possible*? He knew that *Cruciatus* affected the brain, which believes that the body is experiencing great physical pain, and that Neville Longbottom's parents had been under *Cruciatus* for so long that they had gone insane from it. They had lived for years in the mental ward of St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies, not recognizing their son when he came to visit them. Jeffries had not had the curse on him for as long as the Longbottoms, it seemed to Harry, yet it must have been longer than Harry had experienced it to have this effect. When Ron had placed the curse on him he had used the pain-blocking technique he'd perfected to avoid actually feeling the pain. *I believed I could do it, and I was able to*, he thought. *I believed in myself*.

He stared at Jeffries with a new respect. *He's figured it out*, Harry thought. *He's gotten mind-over-matter down pat. But does that make him a wizard now?*

Jeffries gazed out at the crowd now with a sympathetic smile. "I know you're frightened; of course you are. Believing in yourself isn't easy. You know all of your flaws. You know all of your failings. You are the one person who has no illusions about *you*." He held out his hands. "But I have learned that I have enough *belief* now, enough strength of mind to help others believe in themselves. I first discovered this last Bonfire Night, when I went to Blackpool Pier for the fireworks show, and some burning ash landed on a man's hand. He was screaming in agony; I don't know what made me do it, but I pushed my way through the crowd and took his burnt

hand in mine and convinced myself that his burn was healed. Perhaps I couldn't stand the thought of another person suffering like that, I don't know. Nothing happened at first. Then I put my hand on his head, instead of his burn, and I said to him, "You have to do it! You have to believe your burn is healed!"

"*Believe!*" Rodney Jeffries cried out now, his voice carrying to the far corners of the tent and beyond.

"*BELIEVE!*" he repeated even more vehemently.

"And then —" he said again, for suspense. Harry waited. "We both looked down at his hand. He *was* healed, completely healed. He looked up at me in shock, then started telling anyone around us who would listen what had occurred. And from that moment on, now knowing that I could communicate that ability to believe in myself completely to *other people*, knowing that I could *change others' lives*, I knew I could not keep this to myself any longer. It would be irresponsible for me not to share it with *the world*."

Harry wasn't sure when it started; he was aware of a low rumble in the crowd, then after half a minute, he was able to hear the people gathered chanting in unison:

"*Believe! Believe! Believe! Believe!*" It wasn't being pronounced in the usual way, with the emphasis on the second syllable. They were actually saying, "*BEE-leeve, BEE-leeve, BEE-leeve...*"

Harry looked around; there were people from all walks of life. He glanced at Babcock and Forbes. They looked distinctly uncomfortable, as though they wanted to join in, but found it to be an awkward thing to do after their previous grouching about Jeffries. After a little while, Rodney Jeffries said, "Who here needs to believe in themselves? Needs to get that promotion? Make that sale? Propose to that beautiful girl? Conquer that supposedly unconquerable disease?"

"*You will be known.*"

"I do!" a man cried, standing.

Harry was jolted. Sandy had spoken to him, the sibilant sound of Parseltongue blending into the babble around him; Babcock and Forbes were oblivious to the hissing, he saw immediately. *You will be known*. Harry didn't like the way that sounded. And judging from his past experience, she was referring to something that would happen in a matter of minutes.

The crowd continued chanting, becoming a blur of white noise. The man who had cried "I do!" was no more than forty, but he walked with a stooped posture and used a cane for support. He hobbled forward, down the aisle. Jeffries walked down the aisle toward him until now the pair of them were standing in the center of the tent.

"What do you need to believe?" Jeffries asked him.

"I — I know that I'm always going to have arthritis, but — but I would like to believe that it doesn't hurt as badly as it does..."

"NO!" Jeffries cried. "Don't stifle your belief. *Believe* that you will be *rid* of arthritis, not merely the pain." He put his hand on the man's head and cried, "*Believe!*"

The man looked like an electric shock had gone through him. His legs buckled beneath him, and a man — whom Harry immediately recognized as Adam Justice — sprang from his seat on the aisle and caught him under the arms. The arthritic man looked like he was unconscious. Then Adam Justice helped him to stand and the man blinked and opened his eyes wide. To Harry, he seemed to be growing, and then he realized that the man simply hadn't been standing up straight before; now he drew himself up, and threw down his cane. He spun in a circle, dancing with delight.

"It's gone! It's gone! My arthritis is gone!"

The crowd went wild, clapping and cheering. The chanting stopped and now the choir started singing again.

"*To dream the impossible dream...*"

"If you need help believing in yourself, come forward and let my belief help *yours*! Just decide on a goal and together we can realize that goal!"

While the choir sang on, the aisle filled with people making their way toward Rodney Jeffries, who would bend his ear to the person's mouth, then close his eyes and touch each person's head, crying, "*Believe!*" very loudly. Every time, the person collapsed, was helped up, and stood thanking Jeffries with a radiant face. Several women kissed him, and most of the men were pumping his hand up and down. (although a few also kissed him). The line seemed to grow longer rather than shorter as more and more people plucked up the courage to go forward.

The line in the aisle was two-across now, and suddenly, Harry thought he saw someone familiar walking there, but it was hard to see because there was a rather large man in the way. When she was finally standing before Rodney Jeffries, swallowing nervously, Harry gasped. He didn't

know what she was whispering into Jeffries' ear, but a moment later, he was putting his hand on her head and ordering her to believe. A red crackling light connected the two of them briefly (which hadn't happened before), and then she collapsed, not getting up quickly like the others. Instead she opened her eyes and looked up from the ground. Finally, she started to stand, shaking.

"What —" she gasped "— what did you do to me?" Her voice carried to the far corners. Harry saw that even Jeffries looked concerned.

"I — I don't know —" Jeffries said softly, which Harry was not expecting.

"Did you get rid of the cancer or not?" she demanded, putting her hand to her breastbone, and then to her mouth, clearly not having intended announcing her problem to the world at large. Harry dropped his jaw. *Cancer?*

"I —" Jeffries stammered. "I'm not sure — did you truly believe that it would be gone?"

She looked livid and desperate and sad all at once. When he tried to move toward her, she held out her hand to stop him, and suddenly he flew backward, striking the front of the dais. The choir stopped singing abruptly and there was utter silence. She dropped her jaw, horror-struck, then stared at her hand, at the hand that had made Rodney Jeffries fly backwards. Then her eyes rolled back in her head and she fainted.

Harry's first instinct was to groan and think, *Not again*, but a more urgent instinct then overwhelmed him and he leapt from his chair.

"Aunt Petunia!" he cried, arriving at her side in a split second. He lifted her limp body and tried to call her name again. The tent had been silent as the grave before Harry had spoken; now it was in an uproar.

Harry was aware that someone was standing next to him; the feet belonged to Rodney Jeffries. Jeffries stooped down, asking Harry, "She's your aunt?" But then he stopped cold on seeing Harry's face. He gasped, and it seemed to Harry that time was standing still as he and Jeffries looked at each other. He didn't move while the other man reached out and lightly traced his scar with his finger.

"*You're Harry Potter*," Jeffries breathed, almost reverently. Harry swallowed.

"How do you know that?" he choked out. Sandy had said, *You will be known*. This was what she meant. But *how*? Jeffries didn't answer, but just

stared at Harry and his scar. Harry shook himself and stood with his aunt's limp body in his arms. "Let me through!" he cried to the encroaching crowd. Then Adam Justice spotted him; Grace was with him.

"You!" Grace cried.

"You're that kid who was in here snogging your girlfriend!" Adam Justice cried. Harry saw a shocked look on Mr. Babcock's face and an amused one on Dr. Forbes'.

"Mr. Babcock! Dr. Forbes! Help me!" he called to them. They both made their way through the crowd, Dr. Forbes leading the way, and soon they were outside on the grass.

"This way", Mr. Babcock said. "The vicarage is close — we can use my car."

Harry was carrying just the upper half of his aunt now; Dr. Forbes was helping with the other half. When they reached Babcock's car, which turned out to be a Ford that was about thirty years old (with a huge back seat), they put Petunia Dursley inside and Dr. Forbes examined her quickly.

He emerged from the car, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. "She's in shock. You get her home and throw cold water on her face and then give her a nice cuppa. She'll come round."

"Dr. Forbes — when — how — I didn't know. Cancer —"

"Ah. She didn't tell you."

"No. Was she seeing you about it? Does my uncle know?"

"I'm just the village doctor, Harry. And I don't know whether she's told her husband. All I can say is that I referred her to an oncologist in London some months ago. There's no harm in telling you that now, as you already know that she has cancer. But I can't say anything more."

Harry looked into the back seat. "We should get her home. Uncle Vernon's been wondering where she's going in the evenings..."

Harry sat in the back seat with his aunt's head pillowed on his leg; he felt oddly protective of her suddenly, and noticed again the family resemblance to his mother that he was only able to spot in certain lights, or when she held her head just so. It was easier to see in repose, when she wasn't contorting her features into a sneer.

As he drove, Mr. Babcock hummed *The Impossible Dream*. Harry was about to comment on this, but he thought it was possible that the vicar

didn't even realize he was doing it. Dr. Forbes didn't seem to notice; he rode half-turned toward the back seat, keeping an eye on his patient.

When they pulled up outside the Dursley house, Harry said, "Dr. Forbes — could you ring the bell and talk to my uncle first, so he doesn't panic?"

Forbes nodded and walked toward the front door while Harry and Mr. Babcock carefully removed Petunia Dursley from the back seat of the car and carried her toward the door. Dr. Forbes never had a chance to offer Vernon Dursley any reassurance, for he started going mad as soon as he saw Harry and the vicar carrying his wife. Harry motioned to the stairs with his head, and he and Babcock started carrying her upstairs while Forbes yelled at his uncle, "Calm down, man! She's all right. Had a bit of a shock, though..." Harry grimaced; he was a nice man, was Dr. Forbes, but his bedside manner needed some work.

They placed Petunia Dursley carefully on her bed and Harry removed her shoes. He asked Babcock to bring a glass of cold water from the bath, and he left. Harry frowned, brushing her hair from her brow. *How* had she thrown Jeffries back against the dais like that? It looked for all the world as though she'd performed either a banishing charm or the Disarming Charm. Was his Aunt Petunia a witch and never knew it? Did Dumbledore know it? Harry was very confused; he'd thought the lost Weasley sisters were the only adult-witches-living-as-Muggles he was going to have to deal with in this life.

Babcock made to throw the water in the glass at her face, but Harry took it from him and dipped his hand into the icy water, patting her face with his cold hand. His aunt finally blinked and then widened her eyes when she saw the vicar.

"Oh!" she cried, distraught. "I — please — please can I talk to my nephew, Mr. Babcock?"

The vicar nodded and put his hand on Harry's shoulder, squeezed it for a moment. "Shall I call on you tomorrow, Mrs. Dursley?" he asked.

"No!" she said, very suddenly. Harry frowned. "I mean — don't bother yourself, vicar, really. I'll be fine." Her voice shook, not making her sound very convincing. Harry had never remembered seeing her vulnerable like this.

"I'll let myself out, then", he said, looking more than a little rejected. When he was gone. Harry turned to her. He wasn't certain how to start.

"Does — does Uncle Vernon know about — about the cancer?" He waited, surprised that he'd had the courage to say the word. He remembered Snape's Pensieve, his aunt visiting his mother, talking about their mother dying.

"Yes", she said tersely. "But he — he doesn't know —"

"— that you've been going to hear Jeffries", he finished, and she tightened her lips, neither nodding nor shaking her head. She swallowed and looked at him, and he realized suddenly how frightened she was.

"I never went forward before. On the other nights. I had always stayed in my seat. Tonight I finally stood and — I — I didn't know he would turn me into — into *one of you*. He must — he must be *like you*." She shuddered, then covered her face with the pillow.

"Aunt Petunia, stop! What makes you think —"

"Oh, don't pretend!" she said uncovering her face again. "You saw it! And so did everyone there! I'm ruined! I can never show my face in the village again — possibly in all of Surrey —"

"Aunt Petunia", he said as slowly and evenly as he could. "I don't mean to frighten you — but there seems to be a — a pattern of people lately doing what *seems* to be magic even though they *seem* to be Muggles —"

"Do you think you could say 'seem' a few more times?" she snapped irritably. "How does that help me?"

"Well", he hesitated, "Mrs. Figg has some people looking into it —" he said slowly, wincing, waiting for the negative response. Having only recently discovered Mrs. Figg was a witch, he was uncertain how she would take this.

Surprisingly, she actually looked interested in what he had to say. "Perhaps", she said, her voice still shaking, "we can go to see Arabella tomorrow about my, er, little problem."

Harry almost fell off the edge of the bed when she said this. "Oh. Um, all right. If — if you don't mind — don't mind going over there."

She returned to being her usual irritable self. "Yes, I *do* mind. I mind very *much* that I am now an unnatural *freak of nature* —"

"We don't know that, Aunt Petunia. Let's wait and see what Mrs. Figg has to say. Maybe — maybe it's temporary. You don't know."

Vernon Dursley entered the room and Harry stood up as his uncle rushed to his wife's side. "Petunia, my darling! Forbes couldn't tell me anything. Are you all right?"

"I'll be all right if Harry ever stops gawping like a beached fish and gets me my tea!" she snapped at him, but for some reason, Harry suddenly felt like this was an act, as though she was trying to convince her husband she was Petunia-Dursley-As-Usual, that everything was normal and she was not in danger of actually having a civil conversation with her annoying nephew.

As he walked down to the kitchen, Sandy spoke again: "*Bells shall ring.*" Harry frowned. What might that mean? But he knew it would do no good to ask her. He went to the kitchen and made his aunt's tea; when he returned to the bedroom and handed her the piping hot mug, his uncle was rubbing her feet and talking in low, soothing tones to her. Harry felt he should leave quickly; clearly, she didn't want her husband to know anything about where she was and what had occurred earlier in the evening. He had a feeling that Dr. Forbes probably hadn't told his uncle about his aunt making Rodney Jeffries fly backward, or even that she'd gone to see Jeffries at all. Forbes seemed to be very circumspect.

Harry was feeling that a cup of tea might not be a bad idea for him, either, and he went back down to the kitchen, bustling about and taking out a packet of biscuits to eat as well. When the phone rang shrilly, it jolted him at first, but then he realized that that must have been what Sandy meant, and he ran to pick it up, wondering if it was the vicar or the doctor, checking up on his aunt.

He was utterly unprepared for the voice he heard.

"Harry! Is that you?"

"Hermione? Is something wrong?"

"No!" she said, and now he could hear the undercurrent of delight in her voice. "Not at all! I've found her! Margaret Dougherty! The right one, I'm almost positive! She has a web site. Do you have something to write with, so I can give you the address?"

He found a pencil and scrap of paper and quickly wrote down what she told him. "That's wonderful, Hermione!"

"I know!" she said, unabashed. "Wait until we tell Ron. *And* Ginny", she added, sounding just a little mischievous.

"Oh, you —" he started to say, but then he added, "and Ron's and Ginny's brothers. Especially Bill and Charlie. Remember how Mrs. Weasley said they've always blamed themselves?"

"Oh! And Mr. and Mrs. Weasley! They'll be thrilled! Oh, Harry, this will be wonderful!"

"Hold on, hold on. We still have to make sure it's really her. How do you know this is her website?"

"She talks about being adopted at the age of seven and not remembering anything before that. Who else could it be? Of course, she and I probably won't get on, unfortunately —"

"Why not?"

"Well — you know how I am about Divination —"

"So?"

"So? That's what her web site's all about. It's her hobby. Tarot, horoscopes, star charts, you name it."

Harry swallowed. "Does she — does she say she can see auras?"

"Yes — how did you know? Oh, wait. That's probably another one of those things you can't explain until you show me your Pensieve..."

"Well — it would just be kind of hard for you to understand until you have. I don't want to start telling at the wrong end. And I wouldn't assume right away that you won't get on with her. You get on with all of the other Weasleys."

"I suppose. I'll just have to keep my opinions about Divination to myself."

Harry smiled, glad Hermione couldn't see him. He tried not to laugh outright. "And that shouldn't be at *all* difficult..."

"There's no call for sarcasm. Oh, all right — I suppose there is. Let's just wait and see. You take a look at the web site and tell me what you think, whether we should try to find out how to contact her in the real world."

"All right. But first —" he lowered his voice and peered into the front hall to see whether his uncle might be coming downstairs; he carefully closed the kitchen door and leaned against it. "I have some good news and some — well, some confusing news..."

He told her first about finding Sandy. However, instead of being glad for him, she sounded more worried than ever.

"Harry — that's not a very good sign. If she's worried about you, that other snake may have Seen something Sandy hasn't told you about yet. Or some other larger snake at the zoo may have Seen something. Sandy probably went through quite a lot to get out of the zoo and come all the

way down to Surrey from London. That's not a huge thing for a human, but for a *snake*? Although, I suppose the good thing is that she *is* with you again..."

Harry sighed; he should have known Hermione would have something to say about everything. Next he described his visit to the Rodney Jeffries show that evening, and having to bring his aunt home, and the cancer.

"Oh, the poor thing!" Hermione said, as though he hadn't described his aunt as the worst parent on the planet for the past six years. "She must have been going looking for a miracle or something..."

"I reckon. In all your reading, Hermione, have you ever heard of someone magical not finding out they're magical until they're all grown up? Even middle aged?"

"How old is your aunt?"

"She turned forty-three at the end of May."

"Hmm. I can look through *Hogwarts, A History*. And writing to Dumbledore would probably also be a good idea. Do you really think she's magical now, Harry?"

"I don't know. But my mum was. Some families have more than one Muggle-born magical person. Look at the Creevey brothers."

"That's true. And I can't believe what Jeffries said about the Westminster explosion! What did Voldemort *do* to him?"

"I dunno. You should hear his choir, though. Really good. He puts on quite a show. I think the thing that bothers *me* the most is the fact that he knew who I was. Some bloke who used to be a law clerk just *looked* at me and said, 'You're Harry Potter'. Why? How?"

"I don't know. But didn't you say Mrs. Figg and the operatives are already looking into Jeffries and that milkman?"

"Yeah. I'm going over there tomorrow; maybe I can find out more."

"Drop me an owl when you do; you can ring me up too, if you like, but I like having things on paper. I've had a terrible time taking notes while we've been talking..."

"You're taking notes? Hermione, we're not in school now..."

"That's no reason not to be organized. Now — do you think you can get into Dudley's room to check that web site?"

"I'll try. Thanks for finding it. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Good. Love you. Have a good night." She hung up and Harry found himself listening to nothingness. Odd, he thought, how we can say that

now that we're no longer a couple.

"Love you", he said into the phone, although he knew she was no longer there.

He crept up the stairs and put his ear to his aunt's and uncle's bedroom door, hearing only snoring. He entered Dudley's room cautiously and closed the door securely. The noise of the computer coming on made him wince, but when he was finally able to go to Margaret Dougherty's website, he couldn't have stopped grinning if he'd tried.

"Hermione, I could *kiss you*", he said softly, marveling as he read the site. At one point, Margaret Dougherty even wrote, *Now, oddly enough, I've never actually been able to do a chart for myself; I can only do them for others.* Harry smiled, remembering that that was because she didn't know her true birthday. As he continued to read, only one word came into his head, inspired by something Mr. Babcock had said earlier in the evening. He grinned broadly and whispered under his breath:

"Bingo."

Windows

Harry looked sideways at his aunt as they waited for Mrs. Figg to answer the door. Mrs. Figg finally answered the door and she smiled sweetly at his aunt, which very nearly made Harry demand to know who she *really* was.

His aunt nodded at the old woman, saying tersely, "Arabella. Thank you for seeing us", as though they'd only just been introduced. Harry smiled ruefully at her before they were ushered into the living room. Draco was lounging comfortably in an armchair, watching a football match on the television. He looked up at Harry obliquely, saying, "Harry — did you know Muggles have something they call a World Cup, too?" Then he noticed Petunia Dursley and he sat up abruptly, switching off the television. "Oh", he choked out. "Hello." He turned very pink and started rearranging things on the tea table.

To cover the awkward moment, Harry said, "Of course I know. I grew up *here*, remember?"

"Right, right", Draco muttered, stirring the sugar with the sugar spoon.

They all sat and engaged in the formalities of serving tea. Then Mrs. Figg fixed Petunia Dursley with an eye that was starting to remind Harry of her brother's magical eye, and said, "Suppose you tell me why you're here, Petunia, unless it's to tell me off for not informing you that I'm a witch."

Harry's aunt put down her cup and saucer and pursed her lips. Harry suddenly felt quite sorry for her and put his hand on hers, asking quietly, "Do you want me to tell them what happened last night?" She nodded, not looking at any of them, and Harry explained that he'd gone to see Jeffries out of curiosity and described everything that happened, including his aunt making Jeffries fly backwards.

"Remember when Katie and I told you about the magical signatures? Well, now that I've been, I know why they weren't on the dais. He doesn't stay up there; he goes down into the aisle and does — whatever he does — in the middle of everyone. When I was trying to sleep last night, I remembered that when we'd seen the signatures, there was a blur of pink in the middle of the tent, which must have been where he was standing when

he was doing everything. I still wish I knew how he knew *me*, though. Oh — and did Draco tell you —"

"— that the tent was gone this morning. Yes. When he came back from his run he told me. I called Albus. We'll talk about that later", she said, eyeing Petunia Dursley. She put her own hand on Harry's aunt's. "How are you feeling this morning, dear?"

She swallowed. "I feel — odd. When I woke, I thought — I just wanted to feel *normal*, and eat my breakfast and read the newspaper and be *normal*, and suddenly, the bedroom door flew open and the newspaper flew into the room and landed right on my lap! And when I was in the kitchen, *things* were happening..."

Harry's jaw dropped. "You didn't tell me that!"

"You were out *running*," she spat at him.

"*And* walking Dunkirk. But — but — you have to be careful! What if a Muggle saw you —?"

She stood suddenly and her plate of biscuits crashed to the floor and broke. "I *am* a — a — a Muggle, or what I prefer to call a *normal* person!" she exclaimed. Then she looked down remorsefully at the broken plate. "Oh, Arabella — your china —"

Mrs. Figg sat back in her chair and raised one eyebrow. "Well, Petunia — fix it."

She looked at Arabella Figg. "Excuse me?"

The eyebrow was still raised. "I said to fix it. You may be many things, my dear, but I do not think it would be accurate at this point to call you a Muggle." She nodded at the broken dish. "Go on. Think about it being whole again. Focus all of your mind on it."

Harry's heart was racing; he watched his aunt look back and forth between Mrs. Figg and the pieces of china on the floor. Then he saw her swallow and hold out her hand, looking like the broken dish might be carrying some fatal air-borne virus. She started shaking violently after a minute, her eyes looking wild, and then, suddenly, the bits of the plate leapt into the air, joined themselves back together and settled neatly back on the tea table, in one piece. Immediately after, the fallen biscuits leapt up onto the plate where they'd previously been.

His aunt looked at Mrs. Figg, then Harry and Draco. Draco gave her a broad smile. "Not bad for your first time!" he said encouragingly. Harry

was actually finding it hard to hate him at this moment, but he did feel a discontent rumble through him.

His aunt turned very pink when Draco Malfoy smiled at her. She sat again, moving her hands in her lap nervously. "I — I *did* do that, didn't I?"

Mrs. Figg smiled gently at her. "I don't know whether this Jeffries fellow did it or whether you had already started to evince magical abilities and you'd been ignoring it, but *you* definitely did mend that plate, Petunia. As Draco observed, not bad. Not bad at all." Harry was amazed to see that his aunt was actually looking rather pleased with herself — although she was trying to hide it.

"How — how is this possible?" he demanded of his old baby-sitter.

Mrs. Figg sighed. "Well, it's a little complicated. What do you think, Harry, separates magical people from non-magical people?"

He stared at her as though she were mad. "Being able to do magic or not do magic, of course."

"That's not what I mean. *Why* can magical people do magic?"

He shrugged, at a loss. "I don't know — they're born that way, I suppose."

"*Why?*"

"*Why?*"

"Yes. *Why?*"

He opened his mouth, then shut it again. "*Because,*" Draco drawled now, in a bored voice, "of our *genes*."

Harry felt very stupid. "Oh. Right. Of course."

Mrs. Figg frowned at Draco. "It's not quite that simple, of course. It's not as though there is a single magic gene that's either turned on or off. There are actually a large number of magic genes — no one is really sure how many. Wizards have actually had the human genome mostly mapped for some time now, while Muggles are only just now catching up. However, even though we have identified the sequence of genes which have been definitely identified as tied to magic, which I believe Muggle scientists have assigned to various abilities like singing and so forth, as some of the genes do more than one thing — although, truthfully, they're a bit vague about it as well — we're only a little better off. I can tell you that most wizards have more than half of their magic genes 'turned on', if you will, while most Muggles have more than half of their magic genes 'turned off'. We do not know of anyone who has *all* of their magic genes turned on,

and it seems that even your average Muggle has one or two turned on. It's not enough to do real magic, generally, but it's why, in a large group of Muggles, odd things sometimes occur. Collectively, they *can* bring together enough magical energy to do *something* — either good or evil."

Harry frowned. "I — I never thought about it before. So someone who's magical might have a gene turned on for — making potions, or flying, or —"

"*She's ahead.*"

"What? Who's ahead?" he hissed at his arm. Then he noticed the three of them looking at him. His face felt warm.

"Why are you hissing like a leaky balloon, Harry?" his aunt snapped at him.

"*Does this ignorant woman not know what a snake sounds like?*" Sandy snapped right back — although only Harry could understand her.

"*She doesn't know* —" he started to say, when he met Mrs. Figg's gaze. If she had been Queen Victoria she would no doubt have been informing him that "we are not amused."

"When you've *quite* finished, Harry", she said imperiously. Harry felt like he was in school already. *Oh, so that's how it's to be with Professor Figg, is it?* he thought.

"As *I was saying*, take you, for instance, Harry. I understand you have the Parseltongue gene turned on, so that you can speak to snakes and understand what they say. However, Albus believes that you weren't born that way, that it occurred after you were attacked, as a baby. In fact, he and I both believe that attack caused a number of your dormant magical genes to be switched on. This Jeffries fellow may have had more magic genes turned on than most Muggles — although still not enough to manifest magic — and somehow, his experience in the tube station activated *more* of his magic genes. I believe he then caused the same thing to happen to Petunia when she came into contact with him." She turned to Harry's aunt. "You, my dear, may not have had as many magic genes turned on as your sister when you were born, and so you were not identified as a witch and did not receive a Hogwarts letter; however, you very likely had a good number turned on, more than most people, I should think, as you are the sister of a witch, and then your experience with Jeffries — like his experience with Voldemort — seems to have put you over the top, and you

now have enough genes that are no longer dormant, and you are manifesting magic."

"But even though you say Aunt Petunia didn't have enough magic genes turned on when she was born to manifest magic, *most* magical children don't start to manifest magic right away, do they?"

"That is true, Harry. But think about this: I knew your father, and you seem to have inherited your father's problem with rapidly-growing facial hair, which would not have manifested itself until you were actually old enough to *grow* facial hair. Some magic comes earlier, some later. This is why witches and wizards don't go to Hogwarts until they are around eleven."

"And why we're not allowed to do magic outside of school until we're seventeen?"

"Yes. Dormant magical genes can 'wake up' at unpredictable times, making a young witch or wizard's magic unexpectedly stronger with absolutely no warning. And since our emotions have a great deal to do with our execution of magic, and adolescents' emotions are all over the place, thanks to their hormones, the rule against magic outside of school helps deal with that problem as well."

Draco smiled smugly. "Of course, *I* don't have to worry about that any more", he said pointedly to Harry. Mrs. Figg hit him with the back of her hand before continuing. Harry was disappointed. He had rather hoped she would make his mouth disappear.

"Although we wizards understand a great deal about genetics, we haven't attempted to turn on dormant magic genes. At least, most people haven't. I suspect that one thing Voldemort was doing all those years was working on potions and spells to turn on every one of his magic genes, in order to become the most powerful wizard in the world.

"In our world, such a thing is looked on as Dark Magic, largely because of the nefarious use to which it could be put. Muggles are just now discovering that dormant genes can be activated or that they can be substituted by an infusion, if you will, of genes from an outside source. They call this process 'gene therapy'. I do not pretend to understand how it works — even most Muggles doing it don't really understand it yet, either, and it has proved fatal to some people — but I do understand that the ultimate goal is to cure genetic diseases.

"Muggles are unaware, of course, that there are magic genes that could accidentally activate. There are many genes which we all carry but which remain dormant in most people. Or genes that are dormant in both parents that can be activated in their child. Just as two people with dwarfism may produce a child of average height, so can two Muggles, who have mostly dormant magic genes, produce a child with enough active magic genes to be a witch or wizard."

Harry sat silently, staring into his tea cup. After a minute he lifted his eyes to her. "So Jeffries isn't really curing anyone, is he?"

"I think he is doing exactly what he says he's doing — helping to augment people's ability to *believe*. I think the ability to believe in things we cannot see, or that which is not necessarily supported by empirical evidence, is a gene in and of itself. Some people like to call this a 'religion' gene. However, it is also very important in magic, where *believing* that you can perform a spell is as important as knowing the incantation. He is probably helping people a great deal by augmenting their ability to believe that they can do certain things. Sometimes belief is all that's necessary for a person to accomplish what seems impossible."

"But isn't that — isn't that a little like the Imperius Curse?"

"Not quite, Harry. A wizard putting someone else under Imperius is trying to control that person. Jeffries seems to be helping people to control *themselves*. He does not seem to be imposing his will on them — that is a significant difference. He is helping them to reach their own goals. Presumably. A person's inherent disbelief can still stymie the process. They can blame him and say he is a charlatan, all because *they* did not believe strongly enough. Actually, I'm quite impressed with Muggles. Jeffries could have used his ability for great evil. Muggles who are working on gene therapy are trying to cure disease. I know my brother tends to go on about how much more dangerous Muggles are than wizards, but I've also seen that Muggles can go farther in the other direction than we have, as well. The Muggle capacity to work for the greater good is something I've always admired. Don't tell Alastor, but as dreadful as some Muggles can be, I also quite admire them for many reasons."

Harry's aunt was frowning. "That's all very well and good", she said. "But *now* what do I do? Now that he's — he's switched more of — of these genes on —"

"Well, you might start by making yourself well, Petunia."

"What?"

"You heard me. You can do this. Think about converting the cancerous cells to normal cells. *Believe*. Picture it very clearly. Get a medical journal if it will help, so you can see photos of normal cells and cancer cells, so you really know what you're doing. There's a reason, you know, why witches and wizards live longer than Muggles, and it isn't all fancy potions."

"But-but —"

"But she asked my mum to cure my grandmother of cancer", Harry interrupted, "and my mum said she was afraid she would kill her if she tried."

"How do you know that?" his aunt demanded.

"Yes, well, she could have", Mrs. Figg said, ignoring Petunia Dursley's interjection. "Your grandmother wasn't the witch, Harry. It's far more effective when the subject is also the magical person. That core of belief in one's own abilities is the most important element of success. When were you diagnosed, dear?"

"Dr. Forbes referred me to a specialist in London two months ago."

"And what did the specialist say?"

She looked down at the plate she'd repaired, smoothing her skirt with her hands and turning pink. "I — I never went to see him —"

To Harry's surprise, Mrs. Figg nodded. "You were terribly frightened. I understand. Well, do you still have the information he gave you?" She nodded. "Good. Go to see him. You want to find out exactly where the cancer is and how far along. You need to know exactly what you're dealing with if you're going to beat this. Unless you'd rather use the Muggle methods of coping —?"

Unexpectedly, his aunt began to cry, slow tears trickling down her cheeks. "No! My mum — she lost all of her hair, and weighed six stone when she died, if that. The end of her life was a misery... That's why I didn't go to the specialist in London..."

Mrs. Figg nodded again. "Just going to see him for diagnosis doesn't mean you're agreeing to any treatment. Think of it as a fact-finding mission. Take notes — he'll like that. As for literature, try to get anything with very good pictures of cells. You need to know what you're doing. I've heard of some very strong-minded Muggles managing to alter their health through imagery exercises, and they probably only have a handful of

active magic genes compared to you. I can come with you if you'd rather not take Vernon."

Petunia Dursley looked very grateful. Harry tried not to show his surprise. "Would you, Arabella? Th-thank you."

They rose to go, but Mrs. Figg detained Harry. "Can I keep Harry for a little bit, Petunia? As he's Head Boy and I'm going to be one of his professors in September, there are a few things we need to discuss."

Harry frowned, but his aunt left without questioning this and he returned to the living room, sipping his tepid tea, wondering what she really wanted to talk about. Mrs. Figg checked her watch, then said, "Any minute." Harry looked at Draco Malfoy, to see whether he had any idea what she was talking about. He raised his eyebrows and shrugged. He soon found out why they were waiting, however, when a spinning head suddenly popped into the firebox. Harry jumped, then settled back into his chair when it stopped.

"Hello, Harry! I'm so glad you're there." Hermione grinned at him.

"Hermione! When —?" And then he remembered something. *She's ahead. She's. A. Head.*

"*Very funny,*" he whispered to Sandy. Hermione didn't notice.

"Minerva added my dad's office fireplace to the network. It doesn't allow travel, though, so people can't just intrude on Dad whenever they please. She's accustomed to talking to Professor Dumbledore this way, you understand, and she wanted to be able to check in with him without having to wait for an owl to reach him or having to arrange for him to be at a Muggle telephone or something. I've never done this before. It's much more convenient than using the phone; I have both hands free for taking notes..."

Harry laughed, and so did Draco Malfoy, but his wasn't a friendly laugh. "You don't even take the summer off, do you Granger?" he said derisively.

She looked at him, her mouth twisting. "Hello to you, too, *Malfoy*. I didn't know you'd be here."

"I'll remind you that I live here. At least for the summer. Did I — did I hear you say the name *Minerva*? Professor McGonagall is staying with you, and you're calling her *Minerva*?"

Hermione looked distinctly smug now, Harry thought. "Yes, she is and I am, not that it's any of your business. At any rate, I've called to talk to

Mrs. Figg and Harry, so *you* —"

"Can just sit here and enjoy my tea and make snarky comments about how anal-retentive you are —"

"*Malfoy!*" Harry cried, standing and glaring at him, clenching his fists.

"Sit down, Harry", Hermione said authoritatively. "I am perfectly capable of ignoring him. Did Mrs. Figg tell you why I'm calling?"

Harry looked at the old woman suspiciously. "No, she didn't."

"Well, I called over there — using the telephone — after I rang off with you last night. I told her what you'd told me about everything that happened in the tent, when you went to hear Jeffries."

He glared at Mrs. Figg. "So you already knew, and you let me sit here repeating all that to you!"

She shrugged. "I wanted to hear it from you. And I wanted to see whether Petunia had a difference of opinion about what had occurred."

Harry turned to the fireplace, to Hermione's head. He was having a hard time getting used to seeing it there. "Why did you call her?"

"Because I've also been doing some research about the Muggle milkman. I think there's a connection. I don't know whether Jeffries is responsible for him, but I think the Muggle milkman is another person who had a few more magic genes turned on and that's why he's now able to do magic."

Mrs. Figg sat back in her chair and spoke now. "I haven't had a chance to call you about this yet, Hermione, but this morning I received a message about it. Our people in London have figured out who he is. His name is Alphonse Nichols. Technically, he isn't a Muggle. His mother is a witch and his father is a wizard."

"He's a Squib!" Harry exclaimed. She nodded.

"Precisely. Which is why his name isn't on old lists of Hogwarts students and there's no trace of him in the wizarding world. However, with parents who are magical, unlike a Muggle who has had just a few more magic genes turned on, he already knows about the wizarding world. We still don't know who enabled him to do magic, but whoever did it also put him under Imperius, and gave him Polyjuice Potion to take on the appearance of your milkman. And Harry — why didn't you tell me about the milk van?"

"I thought I had. What about it?"

"Oh, I suppose you did. Well, what you failed to notice was that it was a van, a vehicle that would accommodate a person being hidden in the back. Milkmen usually use open milk floats for their deliveries. No hiding places in there. That should have tipped you off right away that something was not right."

Harry shrugged. "I go out running early, but not usually so early that I see these milk floats. I didn't know."

"Whoever put him under Imperius must have been worried about someone catching him and interrogating him, because he made sure Nichols didn't see him. So all we know is that it wasn't a Muggle who was using a wand to break into your neighbors' house."

"Well, that's more than we knew before, isn't it?" Harry said.

"I assume Mrs. Figg told you about magic genes?" Hermione said now.

Harry looked at her suspiciously now. "Was that your doing?"

Hermione looked very pleased with herself. "We talked for a long time about it last night, and I told her about gene therapy. It explains so much! My mum's really interested, too. She almost decided to be a doctor, you know, instead of a dentist. At any rate, I thought of something else after I rang off. Something to do with the music you said Jeffries was using, and I looked up —"

"Did you sleep at all last night, Hermione?" he asked, starting to feel tired just from contemplating what her night must have been like.

"I was too excited to sleep. I can take a nap this afternoon. *Listen* to me! *Impossible Dream* is from the musical *The Man of LaMancha*. It's about Don Quixote. I pulled out my copy of Cervantes and reread it —"

"All of it?"

"Of course. Anyway, I'm wondering whether it's really a coincidence that he chose *that* music. Reading Cervantes got me thinking... What if he was writing about someone whom everyone thought was mad, someone everyone thought was tilting at windmills, because that's all they could see? What if Don Quixote *really* saw dragons, actual dragons, which we know are real, after all. But no one else could see them. Maybe he was a little like a border-line Squib. Filch is a Squib and he has no problem seeing Hogwarts. Or Quixote might have been a Muggle-born wizard who hadn't been educated about the wizarding world, so he could see magical things that Muggles convinced themselves weren't there, but he didn't know the magical solutions to dealing with things like dragons. I think

even a very frightened wizard would be hard-pressed to perform spontaneous magic that would have any effect on a dragon. Think of the way the four of you coped during the Tournament, Harry."

He frowned. "Yeah, I coped by being spiked by a Hungarian Horntail and Cedric and Fleur 'coped' by getting themselves set on fire. So you think Don Quixote was a real person?"

"Not necessarily. But I think Cervantes could have been writing about someone he knew, or someone he'd heard of. I think he wrote about someone who could really *see* things others couldn't, and as a result, the rest of the world thought he was mad. Do you see why it makes perfect sense that Jeffries likes the Don Quixote story, or at least the *Impossible Dream* song from the musical?"

"I do have a concern, about Jeffries, though, Harry", Mrs. Figg said now, "and Hermione shares my concern. Helping Muggles to believe in themselves is one thing, but if he causes any more people like your aunt to evince magical abilities, the Ministry is going to be in an uproar..."

"Why?"

"Why?" Hermione repeated. "Because You-Know-Who and his followers are already going after Muggle-born witches and wizards. It will be very difficult to keep track of a whole slew of new magical people and protect them at the same time. We have to find a way to turn people like your aunt back into Muggles."

"What?" he cried out, getting to his feet again. "I can't believe you, of all people, are saying that, Hermione!"

"What do you mean, me of all people? Don't you think every day I worry about my mum and dad being attacked because of me? Do you think I want more people going through that? It's for their own protection."

Harry thought of the ban on Muggle-borns that had existed in his other life, and the same reasoning being used to support it. He didn't sit down. "I will not let someone stand by and take away her chance to cure herself, or to finally understand what my life is like and what my mother's life was like. It may not have been intentional for her or Jeffries to turn magical, but how can we take that away from them now that they are? You *know* what will happen next, if that's successful, Hermione." He paused, hoping he didn't have to say it, but she had raised her chin at him defiantly. "You'll be next", he said, hurtling on when she hadn't answered him. "That will be just one step away from turning the Muggle-born witches and wizards into

Muggles. We'll be doing Voldemort's bloody work for him, ridding the wizarding world of anyone who isn't a pureblood! Is that what you want?"

"Maybe it's what *he* wants", Draco Malfoy said quietly. They all looked at him in surprise.

"What did you say, Draco?" Mrs. Figg said, examining him carefully.

"Well, I've been sitting here listening to the two of them rant at each other, and I thought — it's perfect. The Dark Lord gives this Jeffries some extra power — and for my money, I think he might have been a Squib, like the milkman. That's why he'd heard of Harry. Then this Jeffries starts to go around giving other people more power. Before you know it, of course, the Ministry will be involved and all worked up about people who don't know what they're doing having magical abilities. You *know* that the step after that is to work out a way to take those abilities away again. And once someone has done that for Muggles who've acquired magical powers — well, I hate to say it, but I agree with Harry. The knowledge of how to do it won't manage to stay in the hands of those who mean well. We all know that. It will leak out, and soon any non-pure-bloods will be purged from the wizarding world. When you think about it, it's pure genius, really..."

"You hear that?" Harry said to Hermione and Mrs. Figg. "Even Malfoy understands what I'm talking about! We can't allow —"

"Oh, I didn't say that would be a bad thing, especially if it gets Granger far, far away from me", Malfoy said, settling back comfortably and chewing on a biscuit. "I just said it's inevitable. And genius. I wouldn't be surprised if my dad came up with the idea before he went to prison. He's an old bastard, but he can be damn brilliant when he wants."

Mrs. Figg shook her head. "We don't know. But I'm afraid I agree with Hermione, Harry. The Ministry needs to crack down on unauthorized magic."

"You're the one who had my aunt repair that plate!" Harry spat at her, outraged. "And you were telling her how to try to cure herself!"

She shrugged. "A test. I needed to see a demonstration of her power. And I don't want her to die, Harry. I'd like to see her do it, to cure herself. But if she kept on doing magic after that... It would be very bad, Harry. She can't be allowed to just go about doing magic where Muggles can see her."

"Too right", Hermione agreed from the fireplace. "I think your prediction about the Ministry getting interested may come true sooner

than you think, Mrs. Figg. Have you seen this morning's *Daily Prophet*?" When the old woman shook her head, Hermione handed her a folded-up newspaper through the flames. She scanned the front page, blanching as she did so. Draco looked over her arm at it, then whistled.

"That Furuncle witch definitely has it in for you", he said to Harry, who was itching to snatch the paper from Mrs. Figg's hands. When she handed it to him, he felt the color leave his face too as he read the story.

Head Boy of Hogwarts or Lawless Renegade? by Daisy Furuncle

LITTLE WHINGING, SURREY — *Last evening, Harry Potter, current Head Boy of Hogwarts, may or may not have performed illegal magic before a large gathering of Muggles. Potter, who is about three weeks shy of his seventeenth birthday and evidently rather impatient to be of-age, attended a performance by infamous inspirational speaker Rodney Jeffries, also currently under investigation by the Ministry of Magic for performing magic before Muggles (although it is still unclear whether Jeffries is a wizard — some suspect he has a behind-the-scenes wizard working for him). Potter was attending the event with his maternal aunt, one Petunia Dursley, and two other Muggles who live in the village. When Potter's aunt went forward for 'healing' from Jeffries, it is unclear what occurred, but soon after, Potter was at her side and Jeffries was being thrown back against a stage that had been erected in the tent that has been the regular venue for his traveling show. Descriptions from witnesses make it clear that a banishing charm was performed.*

Potter and his other Muggle companions quickly removed his aunt from the tent and disappeared into the night. Later in the evening, all of Jeffries' staff and Jeffries himself checked out of the village pub where they had been staying and the current whereabouts of Jeffries and his entourage are unknown. Rumors have been flying to the effect that Potter's aunt, not Potter, performed the banishing charm, but as she is a Muggle, Potter is being considered the most likely culprit. He received a reprimand five years ago for performing a levitation charm

in his home which caused a commotion witnessed by two Muggles. He also blew up another aunt a year after he was reprimanded for the levitation charm, and this time the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad needed to be called out and memory charms performed. No charges were brought against Potter at that time, as the Ministry was preoccupied searching for the fugitive Sirius Black, who is Potter's godfather.

According to the Ministry, they do not have sufficient evidence at this time to charge Potter with violating the International Wizarding Secrecy Act, but there are whispers that Potter's connections in the Ministry (his best friend's father is a highly-placed Ministry official) have hushed up last evening's activities and that he will likely not be charged — again.

Potter is no stranger to subverting long-standing magical traditions. He caused a house-elf to be freed by trickery four years ago and during the previous three terms he was training the house-elves at Hogwarts to fight humans, despite current laws against wand-use by elves. He is clearly out of control, and this reporter shudders to think what sort of chaos would ensue if all underage Hogwarts students received the same sort of special treatment as Harry Potter.

His jaw dropped. "But — but — *completely* twisted — And — and was she *there* Friday night? And — and did I mention twisted —?"

"Yes, it has virtually no relationship to reality", Mrs. Figg said wryly. "Connections at the Ministry, indeed! As though you'd paid someone to pull strings for you! And as though Arthur Weasley *could* protect you, if you really broke the law. *They* know perfectly well what happened, that's why they're not going to charge you. But they do *not* wish to panic witches and wizards by telling them that your Muggle aunt performed magic."

"Panic? Why should that make them panic?"

"Because Muggles who acquire magical abilities won't care about magical law, Harry, about the boundaries we've established to protect ourselves. They'll just think it's a lark."

"Aha!" he cried, pointing an accusing finger at her. "That's it, isn't it? It isn't *really* to protect *them*, as you claim, it's to protect *us*, to keep us

walled off from an entire world of people we're afraid will start demanding magical help to solve all their problems. Even *Hagrid* said that to me when I first met him, and it never occurred to me until now how incredibly *selfish* that is! You were just talking about how you admire Muggles who take things they've learned and use their knowledge for the greater good. But what about all of the problems in the world that could be solved if magic were used to tackle them? And yet we pass laws against doing this and say, *Oh, well, they'd be pestering us constantly for help if we did just a little*. And now it seems there might be a way for some more of *them* to be like us, so we might not have to worry about their asking us for help all of the time, and you want to take that *away* from them?"

"Harry —" Hermione said imploringly from the fireplace. "You don't understand —"

"You're right", he said, looking at her sadly. "I don't understand how you can be a Muggle-born witch saying these things. I have one living relative left: my Aunt Petunia. And no, we've never gotten on, but if her being magical could change that, not to mention *save her life*, I don't want anyone taking that away from her. She's — she's all I've got left", he said softly. None of them answered him, and he turned and left the room, then the house. He leaned against the closed front door of Mrs. Figg's house, breathing heavily, as though he'd just gone for another run. And then he heard Sandy hissing at him.

"I was afraid of this."

* * *

Harry was waiting to go out with Katie the next evening when the phone rang and his aunt answered. He was sitting in the living room, idly switching channels on the television while his uncle read the newspaper.

"I'm — I'm fine", he heard his aunt say shakily into the telephone. She was in the front hall. "Well — I — I did repair a plate yesterday. Arabella told you? It — it felt so strange —"

Harry frowned and strode into the hall. "Who are you talking to?" he demanded of his aunt. She looked a little frightened as she handed him the telephone.

"It's Hermione Granger", she said shakily. "Calling for you."

He grabbed the phone irritably. "Er, good", he said. He dropped his voice to a whisper and covered the handset's speaker. "You can't just go

talking about what you did yesterday to *anybody*. Uncle Vernon probably shouldn't even know. You have to be very, very careful."

She lifted her chin defiantly. "Don't take long. I don't want it tied up", she said, not acknowledging his greater experience in having to keep magical abilities secret.

Harry put the phone to his ear and said, "Hermione? What are you doing talking to my aunt?"

"I was just asking her how she was feeling. She's going through quite a lot, after all. And it's not as though we're strangers; I did *live* with you for a while, and she wasn't really horrid to me the whole time, you know. I think most of the time she was able to forget that I'm a witch."

"She and Uncle Vernon also didn't mind the check your parents gave them..."

"Stop it, Harry, or I think I'd rather talk to your aunt again."

"I'm being that insufferable, am I?"

"I just said so, didn't I?" She sighed. "Listen, I didn't call to fight with you. Quite the opposite — I wanted to make up. I'm sorry about yesterday. I understand what you were saying, and because of your mum and your aunt you're very touchy about the idea of Muggle-born magical people —"

"And *you*", he reminded her. "Why aren't *you* more touchy about Muggle-born magical people?"

"I *am*, Harry. I think — well, I think right now I'm torn. On the one hand, I want to protect myself in the usual way by not telling the entire Muggle world I'm a witch. On the other hand, I don't want anyone to take my magic away from me. I think the second thing is rather unlikely, though, don't you? I mean, we've only encountered instances so far of people having their magical genes turned *on*, not off. We don't even know if the opposite is true. I don't care what Draco Malfoy said —"

But suddenly, mentioning his name gave Harry an idea. "That's not true", he interrupted her. "Think of Malfoy — the Obedience Charm. Voldemort used that to wake up some of Malfoy's dormant magical genes, and he turned *off* some of his own, giving up some of his power. It was voluntary on his part, and got something for it — a slave, basically." Harry swallowed, trying not to think too much about this. "Getting someone to cast that spell on another person in order to reduce their magical abilities wouldn't do much good because then the person with the increased power would have to do whatever they say. But — if Voldemort could find a way

to separate out the power transference part of the spell from the obedience part of the spell —"

"— he'd become the most wizard in the world", she breathed, frightened.

"Exactly. He already knows a spell that does some of this power transfer. He's not only capable of taking as much time as he needs to research this, he has all of his Death Eaters to help him work out the problem — and he's in the habit of recruiting the smartest people he can find — plus, if Mrs. Figg is right that the Ministry will want to crack down on unauthorized magical activity, he might have the Ministry working to find the solution as well. That's what I was talking about yesterday, Hermione. We can't let the Ministry become Voldemort's tool. There's got to be a Death Eater or two who've infiltrated it. If they find the solution before Voldemort — he'll have the answer about five minutes later, if that. I know it and you know it."

She was very quiet. Harry swallowed. "Hermione, you have no idea how dangerous this could be. The next thing you know, the Board of Governors could institute a ban on Muggle-borns at Hogwarts, saying it's for their own protection, so they won't enter the wizarding world when it's particularly dangerous..."

"Oh, they wouldn't do *that* —"

"*Yes they would*. And people who mean well would push hardest for it, not understanding what a mistake it would be! And that's not all. What about Ron?"

"Ron?"

"He's a werewolf", he said quietly, glancing around furtively, to make sure his aunt and uncle weren't nearby.

"What's your point, Harry?"

"Once they've convinced people it's better to keep Muggle-borns out of Hogwarts, how long do you think it would take for the Ministry to decide to lock up all of the werewolves in prison camps?"

"You're mad, Harry. They wouldn't do that."

"Wouldn't they? Just because they've finally accepted that Sirius is innocent — which was only possible because Wormtail confessed — don't give them too much credit, Hermione. I need you to be with me on this. We're Head Boy and Head Girl. We need to be very vocal about anything

the Ministry or Board does which would take the wizarding world in this direction."

"Yes, well, don't you think we're just a bit lacking in credibility, thanks to Daisy Furuncle?"

"I think that was the *purpose* of those articles. Attacking credibility. We can't let that stop us. We have to ignore the press. If the Board of Governors or the Ministry show any signs of doing any of these things, we have to be leaders. If we need to we — we can call a general strike at Hogwarts —"

She started laughing uproariously. "Harry! It's finally happened!"

"What?"

"I've completely radicalized you."

"Well, maybe I can pull *you* back from the establishment now..."

She sighed noisily. "All right, Harry, all right. I'll trust you on this. I don't want to lose my magic and I don't want Ron to go to a prison camp. Oh — Ron says hello, by the way. I just used Dad's fireplace to talk to him last night."

"How is he?"

"A little nervous about going down to London."

"When is he going?"

"The full moon is Wednesday to Friday. We've actually been talking almost every day since Draco's party. When we're not in the same room, it seems like we're fine, we can talk normally..."

"Give him time, Hermione."

Another sigh. "I know, I know. And yet, there are still some things he won't tell me. He said he can't talk to me on Tuesday, for instance, because he's going to be locked in his room all day. Then he looked like he wished he hadn't said anything and he wouldn't tell me *why* he's going to be locked up. I mean, the full moon starts on *Wednesday*. I don't understand..."

Harry swallowed, glad that they were talking using the telephone, instead of her being able to see his face. Ron hadn't told her about a werewolf's uncontrollable urges right before the full moon. Harry both wasn't surprised and wished that Ron *had* told her.

"Do you know anything about it Harry?" she pressed, correctly guessing from his silence that he knew. Harry, however, didn't think it was his place to tell her about this.

"How's your training?" he said croakily, changing the subject.

She paused. "Real smooth, Harry. Okay, *don't* tell me. The training is fine. In fact, I've taken up another kind of training, too. It's really helping me with my physical control. I think Ron will be pleasantly surprised..."

Harry cleared his throat. "Er, I don't think — maybe we shouldn't be discussing this, Hermione..."

"Harry! Get your mind out of the gutter! It's nothing dirty!"

He smirked. "You never used to object when my mind was in the gutter..."

"Well, then there were — um — certain more *tangible* benefits —"

Harry laughed, then stopped when the doorbell rang. "Oh — I have to go. Um — Katie and I are going out." He saw his aunt walk to the door to answer it. "She's just been to Hogsmeade, and I'm worried about her..."

Hermione sighed again. "Katie's a lucky girl, Harry", she said softly. He heard a click as she hung up.

He looked up and saw Katie standing in the doorway, smiling sunnily at him. *Actually*, he thought, *I think I'm the lucky one*. He smiled back at her.

"We're just driving up to London for dinner, Mrs. Dursley", Katie told his aunt, who was examining her shrewdly.

"Is this where you keep your —" his aunt started to say, patting Katie's shoulder bag.

"*We really should be going!*" Harry said quickly, grabbing Katie's hand and dragging her to the car. "Good night, Aunt Petunia!" He did *not* want her getting into a conversation with Katie about wands. Katie didn't even know about the Rodney Jeffries thing yet. Then he thought of the *Prophet* article. Maybe she *did* know.

She stumbled down the path after him. "Harry!" she cried as he continued to pull her along. She was laughing. "What's going on?"

"I'll tell you in the car", he said, looking back at the house, where his aunt was standing in the doorway with her arms crossed. When they pulled onto the motorway to London, he checked first to make sure she was calm and in control of the car.

"Yes, Harry, I'm fine. Why are you being like this?"

"Because I have some things to tell you which might surprise you", he explained. As they continued toward London, he told her about Rodney Jeffries and his aunt, then their visit to Mrs. Figg's and the two

conversations with Hermione — and the *Prophet* article. Which she'd read. She frowned as she drove.

"I hate to say it", she said, pulling up in front of the building where she and Sam lived. "But it sounds like Dad was right."

"Sam? Right about what?"

She grimaced as she closed and locked her car door. "About the Ministry." She looked back and forth. "Let's talk at the restaurant. I drove us here because there's a nice Indian place nearby. No wizarding press", she grinned. "Come on." They walked close to each other, and then their swinging hands collided, and Harry reached out to grasp her hand, remembering when he and Hermione had done this once. She smiled shyly up at him, but she didn't remove her hand, and he smiled back at her, enjoying the simple closeness.

When they were seated at the restaurant, she explained that her father had suspected for years that the Ministry of Magic was just a heartbeat away from deciding they needed to work out a quick way to take away people's magical abilities. "He reckons it would be a far more effective punishment for magical criminals than putting them in Azkaban. Permanent exile from the magical world, you know."

Harry nodded. "I hadn't thought of that. They could use the argument that they're developing it to make Azkaban obsolete." He thought of Sirius. *And what if you're unjustly accused? What if you're an innocent man who's been sent to prison?*

She drank a sip of her water. "Which could make it even harder for me to tell him I'm going into Auror training in September..."

He grinned at her. "You did it! You signed up!"

She shook her head. "You don't just `sign up', Harry. I had to take a whole battery of tests. But I passed every one of them." She smiled, looking very pleased with herself, and Harry was surprised to find that he felt quite proud of her.

"We did it Saturday morning, then Apparated back to Hogsmeade. That's why I picked this weekend to visit, so my dad wouldn't ask where I was going early on a Saturday morning..."

"We?"

She stopped. "Oh, er, I mean — well, there was someone else I ran into at the tests who lives in Hogsmeade. I didn't know he wanted to be an Auror. He did rather well, too. Don't look like that — it's not Lee, although

I probably shouldn't tell you who it is. And I'm going to *kill* Angelina. She lied to me again. Lee does *not* have a new girlfriend. She was just trying to get me all wound up. I actually had quite a nice time this weekend. I spent most of it with — with the other Auror applicant. So I haven't returned to you a broken woman, pining after my former love —" she said melodramatically, her hand on her brow. Harry laughed.

"No, but you're being very secretive about this other Auror applicant."

She shrugged. "Hazard of the Auror's life. Keeping identities a secret. He's going to start his training in September, too. We probably won't be working together, though, since I didn't put myself down for undercover work and he did. On the other hand, I do think we'll be in the same training class."

He leaned closer to her, smiling slyly. "Should I be jealous?"

She looked startled, as though this hadn't occurred to her. "Do you want to be?" she asked softly; their faces were very close together.

Suddenly, the waiter came with their food, and they backed up, both coloring, starting to eat. Harry watched her as she ate, trying to figure out how he felt about her.

When they had paid for their meal, they walked back to Sam and Katie's flat, which turned out to be empty. "Dad said he was going out with the lads. There's a darts tournament or something."

He nodded; his pulse felt quicker, somehow, being in the empty flat with her. They sat on the couch and she turned on the television. "We could just hang about here and watch the telly, if you like."

He nodded again, looking at her profile. They ended up watching a costume drama; he wasn't clear whether it was a film of a Jane Austen novel or just something very similar. At length, he put his arm across the back of the couch behind her head, and she leaned against his chest, still watching the flickering screen.

Somehow, he just didn't find the film compelling enough to watch, and found himself watching her instead. After a while, she seemed aware that he was watching her, but she continued to keep her eyes on the television. Suddenly, without warning, she turned and looked him in the eye, and Harry was never sure whether he moved toward her or she toward him, but once they were holding each other tightly and kissing deeply, it hardly mattered. He felt pulled down, and then they were lying next to each other on the couch, mouths connected still, hands drifting tentatively over arms

and shoulders. She shivered when he stroked her neck, and then he brought his lips where his fingers had been, remembering her responses in the tent, when they'd been putting on a show for Rodney Jeffries' people. She laced her fingers through his hair, sighing, and he moved his mouth further down, caressing the soft skin on her upper arms as her sighs grew louder...

"*Company is coming*," Sandy said simply. Harry swore, then covered his mouth when he realized he'd spoken aloud.

She looked up at him from where she lay on the couch. "*Harry Potter*," she said in mock-horror, her eyes merry. "Do you eat with that mouth?"

He laughed. "Sorry. It's just that — we're not going to be alone much longer. I think your dad's coming back."

Katie sat up. "Oh, really?" she said skeptically. "And what makes you say that?"

"Well — er — do you remember when I was in second year? When Gilderoy Lockhart tried to start a Dueling Club?"

She actually blushed. "Why?" she asked, and Harry wondered whether she had been yet another girl who had been crushing on Lockhart. He could tease her about that later. He reminded her of when Snape had given Malfoy instructions for conjuring the serpent.

"Do you remember when I spoke to it?" She nodded; she had been there, along with most of the school. "Didn't you ever wonder how?"

She raised one eyebrow. "All right, then. How did you do it? And what does this have to do with —" He opened a few buttons on his shirt (trying not to notice where her eyes had gone) and carefully removed Sandy from inside his shirt; her eyes widened and he saw her swallow. She was no longer ogling his chest.

"Sandy", he hissed at her, "this is Katie Bell." He saw her eyes widen further as she listened to the hissing. "Katie", he said to her in English. "This is my snake, Cassandra. Sandy for short."

Katie nodded and gave a feeble smile, then tentatively put out her hand and stroked Sandy's vivid green skin. Her smile grew a little. "She feels nice", she said softly.

"An astute girl", Sandy hissed at Harry.

"Oh, and you're not the least bit biased", he hissed at her, laughing.

Katie looked at him quizzically. "So, you're a Parselmouth", she said slowly. "But that doesn't explain how —"

Suddenly they heard a key on the lock. Katie furrowed her brow, and Harry said quickly, "Snakes have the Sight. A few minutes ago Sandy said, 'Company is coming'. I assumed that meant your dad. I was right, wasn't I?"

Katie was staring at the small snake, flabbergasted, when the door to the flat opened and Sam Bell entered. He wasn't alone; Nigel and Trevor were with him. Harry groaned inwardly. Just what he needed, those two saying things like —

"Oi! Look 'oo's 'ere, Nige! Kate 'n' 'Arry. 'N' look! 'Arry's showin' 'er 'is snake!"

Sam whirled. "What?"

Harry's inward groaning was threatening to break out into the open. Nigel, Trevor and Sam had all seen him wearing Sandy on his arm soon after he'd found her two summers earlier, but he hadn't had her during the previous summer. Harry held up Sandy for Sam to see, his eyebrows raised, and Sam started laughing. Given his reaction, Harry wondered what he would have done if he'd walked in when they'd been engaged in other activities.

"An actual *snake*," said Sam, shaking his head and hitting Trevor with the back of his hand. Sam turned to Harry again, looking pointedly at his unbuttoned shirt. Harry hastily put Sandy back inside his shirt and buttoned up.

"What are you all doing here?" Katie asked, smoothing down her clothes; her voice seemed higher than usual.

"The darts tournament was *brilliant*," Trevor told them. "Your dad is a darts *genius*, little Kate", he said, pointing, as though she might have forgotten which one of them was her dad. It seemed to Harry that the three of them had had quite a lot to drink. It was probably a good thing they were done handling darts for the night.

"We thought we'd play some poker now", Sam told them, looking glad that Harry's shirt was buttoned again.

Katie made a face. "I think I'll just drive Harry home. It's getting rather late, and we all have to *work* tomorrow", she said pointedly, looking at Nigel and Trevor.

"Aw, c'mon, Kate", Nigel said thickly. "C'mon 'Arry. Play a round. I know!" he said, with a lopsided grin at Katie's nicely tanned legs protruding from her skirt. "We could play strip poker!"

Harry was glad to see that Sam's hostility toward him was now directed toward Nigel. "Not with my daughter you don't!" he informed Nigel in a growl, putting his face very close to his co-worker's. Katie quickly pulled him away and kissed her father on the cheek.

"I'll be back in a little while, yeah? Try not to hurt each other while I'm gone?" She looked pointedly at her father, who was starting to calm down. As a former Azkaban prisoner, he certainly didn't want to risk running afoul of the law by performing even accidental magic in front of Muggles. He backed off and his breathing slowed. Harry nodded at him.

"Good night, Sam. See you in the morning. G'night Nigel, Trevor."

"You `ave y'self a *good night*, `Arry", Trevor said to him, winking broadly. Sam was starting to get angry again and Katie was rolling her eyes. *No wonder she wants to leave*, Harry thought.

They reached Little Whinging quickly and parked behind Vernon Dursley's company car. Inside the house, they discovered that his aunt and uncle had already retired, even though it was only ten-thirty. "Do you want to come in for a bit?" Harry asked her. "We could try watching some more television if you like." The moment he said it, he realized that she would probably take it to mean, *We can do some more snogging, if you like*, and as soon as he thought this, he was unsure whether that was actually what he'd meant.

She smiled, with a mischievous glint in her eye. "All right. Or we could just do without the television..." Once they were inside, she led him to the couch in the darkened living room. Harry let himself be led, and when he felt her hands around his neck pulling him down, he willingly went.

They soon found themselves in a similar position to the one they'd been in at the London flat, when Harry heard a step on the stairs his uncle's voice saying, "Who's there?" with trepidation. His first instinct was to hiss at Sandy, "*A warning this time would have been nice*," but he knew that she couldn't control the things she saw. Harry swallowed, scrambled to turn on a lamp and the television, which immediately started blaring very loudly, as it was showing an old James Bond film, and cars and helicopters and large parts of the Soviet Union were busily exploding.

"It's just me, Uncle Vernon", Harry explained, going to the living room door and opening it. His uncle looked suspiciously at him from half-way down the stairs.

"When did you get home?"

"Just a few minutes ago. I was, um, just going to finish watching this film and then go to bed."

"Yes, well, keep it down! Your aunt doesn't feel well..."

He watched his uncle pad back up the stairs in his pajamas and dressing gown before he returned to the living room. Katie was actually watching the film now, it seemed. "I've never seen all of this one!" she said. He was surprised; she hadn't liked the everything-exploding-all-the-time film they'd gone to see on their first date. Of course, this was more of a spy film, and she was going to start training to be an Auror soon, so maybe she regarded James Bond differently.

Soon she was leaning against him again with his arm on the back of the couch behind her, and soon after that they turned to each other and began kissing again (in spite of her supposed desire to see the film). Then she was once more reclining on the couch and he had moved his mouth down to her neck. After kissing her neck for a little while, he suddenly realized that something was wrong. Her hands were no longer moving over his back. He sat up and looked carefully at her. Her mouth was open slightly and her eyes were closed; her breathing was deep and regular. He fought the urge to laugh at himself. *She'd fallen asleep.*

He sat up and looked at her again. *I'm so stimulating I've put her to sleep. Brilliant.* He turned off the television and looked at her fondly for a few minutes, then he carried her up the stairs to his bedroom. He put her gently on the bed and carefully removed her blouse and skirt, telling himself to regard her underwear as something like a bikini and nothing more (if her underwear *had* been a bikini it would have been far more modest than Hermione's, he thought). He pulled the sheet up over her and folded her clothes neatly, putting them on the desk chair. Then he looked around the room; the window was open, as Hedwig was out hunting, and he picked up some dirty clothes and organized some papers and books on the desk into slightly neater piles. Finally, he retrieved some running clothes from his dresser for the morning and started to leave, but then he returned to the bed and kissed her lightly on the forehead. She rolled over on her side and put her cheek on her hand, making him smile as he quietly closed the door.

* * *

Harry's eyes snapped open and he checked his watch; it was exactly six o'clock, when he usually rose to go running. His inner clock had brought him out of sleep at exactly the right time. He sat up on the living room couch, yawning and stretching. It only took him a minute to put on the running clothes he'd retrieved from his room before he left to meet Draco Malfoy.

When he and Malfoy were warming down after their run, Harry said casually, "Well, I'd better be getting back so I can wake up Katie — "

"*What?*" the blond boy squeaked. "You — you and Katie —"

Harry scowled at him. "No, don't be stupid. We were watching a film on television at my house and she fell asleep. I put her in my bed and slept on the couch."

Malfoy shook his head. "The couch? And you're calling *me* stupid?"

"Grow up, Malfoy."

Draco Malfoy shook his head. "I can't believe you're getting so self-righteous about me and Felice when you and —"

"Oh, no you don't. First of all, I'm actually dating Katie. I'm not seeing someone else and cheating on her with Katie. Second of all, we're not sleeping together. So don't think for a second that there's any similarity between what you did and what we're doing."

Harry stalked off toward Privet Drive, having finished warming down. Soon he was under the spray of the upstairs shower, feeling like he had to wash off the stench of conversing with Draco Malfoy. He wrapped a towel around his waist and wrapped Sandy around his arm again and left the bathroom, going to his bedroom to retrieve some clean drawers from his dresser. He dropped the towel and started to step into his underwear when suddenly he heard a long, low whistle behind him. Harry turned and looked behind him, where Katie was sitting up in his bed, the sheet around her waist, and he hastily turned his back to her again and pulled up his drawers before facing her once more.

"Katie! I — I forgot —"

"Oh, nice. You've got a girl in your bed wearing nothing but her underwear and you *forgot?*"

He felt defensive. "I've a lot on my mind. And *you're* the one who fell asleep while we were snogging. And — and I just wanted you to be comfortable while you were sleeping."

She yawned and stretched. Harry swallowed, trying not to look at her bra. "I was knackered", she said, still in the middle of a yawn." I'd stayed up late the night before, talking into the wee hours. You know, at Hog's End. I didn't mean to be rude."

He smiled at her. "That's all right. You should probably call your dad, though, and get him to bring some work clothes for you to use today —" Just then, Sandy hissed at him.

"*Pigs will fly.*"

"What?" he hissed back at her. Katie didn't notice this exchange. Her eyes were wild.

"Dad! Oh, *no*. He'll —"

"— kill me? Or you? Or both? None of those are options I particularly like." Harry forced his attention back to Katie. *Pigs will fly?*

She grimaced. "Just be glad he doesn't Apparate any more. He'd be here right now."

"On the other hand — he does remember you're eighteen, right? And you're not — I mean — I'm assuming that you and Lee — um —"

"Yes, Lee and I `ummed'. Which he does *not* know, or Lee would be eating all of his food through a straw. And he'd have to put the straw in his ear. And don't ask me where his ear would actually be located. As far as Dad's concerned, my age is beside the point. If I'm still not married when I'm forty, he'll be the same way, I expect."

"But — but we haven't *done* anything! I carried you upstairs and I went down and slept on the couch. You couldn't very well drive back home last night; you'd have been killed! You —"

"Harry! Who are you talking to —?" his aunt started to say, opening the bedroom door with a bang. It was unclear to Harry whether she'd had to touch it. Her eyes opened very wide when she saw Katie sitting up in Harry's bed looking like she was only wearing her bra, and then she noticed Harry standing across the room in just his boxers and a snake — but the snake was the least of her concerns. "*What is going on here?*" she demanded. Harry felt a static electricity making his hair stand on end. *Damn!* he thought. *Don't do spontaneous magic*, he thought desperately. *Don't do spontaneous magic...*

"It's my fault, Mrs. Dursley", Katie said quickly, pulling up the sheet and hugging it to her. "I fell asleep while we were watching television, so Harry let me use his room. He slept on the couch."

She looked suspiciously at both of them, back and forth. "And I'm just supposed to *believe* that? Then why are you both in the same room in — in just — just —" she sputtered, staring around the room, as if looking for something that would calm her. She fixated suddenly on a broken bank that had been Dudley's, which Harry had never bothered throwing away. The pieces had sat for years on the top shelf of the bookcase, acting as an ad hoc bookend. Harry and Katie ducked the flying ceramic pig parts; it wasn't as bad as a Bludger, he thought, but it *would* hurt a bit.

Harry tried to reply to his aunt while keeping an eye on the flying bank bits, but the phone rang and his aunt grumped off to answer it. The pieces of pink ceramic pig fell to the floor. When she was gone, Katie scrambled out of Harry's bed and hastily put on her blouse and skirt. Harry suddenly became very aware that he was still wearing only one garment, plus a snake wrapped around his left upper arm. (He would talk to Sandy later about her "prediction.") He quickly pulled on a T-shirt and shorts and found some socks and his work boots.

"*Harry!*" his aunt bellowed. "It's that girl's father calling! Get down here!"

Harry and Katie looked at each other with trepidation and went down the stairs. Everything in the front hall — including the telephone — was floating in the air, and his aunt had a look of power in her eye that Harry did *not* like.

* * *

"Spanner."

Harry handed the spanner to Sam, who was repairing the tiller. Pieces of it were scattered about the drive behind Aberforth's van, and Sam's hands were covered in dirt and grease. It had been a week since The Sleeping Incident, as Harry had taken to calling it in his mind. Sam didn't let Harry out of his sight all day every day at work. Harry was dimly aware of Katie trimming a hedge about thirty feet away. She'd been giving her father the silent treatment; she was very angry with him for treating her like a child, so instead of hovering over *her*, he'd taken to hovering over Harry.

Sam looked at the tool Harry had handed him and frowned. "*Other* spanner", he said with an edge to his voice. Harry handed him the other spanner and took back the first one he'd offered, trying not to sigh. He watched Aberforth, Nigel, Trevor and Draco Malfoy far away, past the

hedge maze, building a Greek-temple-like folly in a small stand of trees at the edge of the broad green lawn. He would have liked to be helping them, even if it meant withstanding ribbing from Nigel and Trevor (when "Dick" wasn't around, as he didn't stand for it) but Sam had insisted he needed Harry's help repairing the tiller and he hadn't been able to get out of it. *I'm not mechanical* Harry thought grumpily. He looked at Katie again. How was she going to tell her father about the Auror training now that they were barely speaking?

When he returned home, however, he had a different problem to worry about. A middle-aged bottle-blond woman was standing at his kitchen window looking in, her jaw dropped as she gazed into number 4 Privet Drive. Harry recognized her as his aunt's comrade in gossip, Yvonne Martin. His heart beating quickly, he strode up to her, saying loudly, "Mrs. Martin! How are you?" He didn't look in the window, fearing what he might see. Unfortunately, Yvonne Martin did not tear her eyes away from the window when she responded to him.

"L-look at what Petunia is doing!" she gasped.

Bracing himself, Harry looked in the kitchen window. His aunt was standing in the middle of the room, smiling and waving her arms while plates and glasses washed themselves and then flew into cabinets whose doors opened themselves. The mop was mopping the floor, hopping into a bucket of soapy water and then out again, dancing across the linoleum, the breakfast table and chairs moving smoothly out of its way and then back into position again. A rag was busily cleaning the work surfaces. Harry swallowed. His aunt was *completely* out of control. He was reminded strongly of trying to keep the house-elves from cleaning, on that first Boxing Day...

Trying to keep his voice even and calm, he stood next to the older woman, looking into his kitchen, and said, "What do you mean, Mrs. Martin?" He hoped he could continue to keep his voice from shaking.

"What do I mean?" her voice rose on a shriek. "She's — the mop — the dishes — just *look!*" she spat, her eyes big as saucers. Harry continued to look at the same sight, but very, very calmly.

"Yes. Aunt Petunia likes a clean kitchen. She's mopping the floor. I should make sure I don't track dirt in, or she'll be very cross with me."

"But — but —" she faltered, now starting to doubt herself. "Flying dishes! The table and chairs — moving by themselves —"

Harry looked at her with one eyebrow raised, and now she turned to look back at him. Good, he thought. Take her attention away from it. He put his arm around her shoulders solicitously.

"Perhaps you had better go home and have a lie-down, Mrs. Martin. Have you been under a great deal of stress lately?"

He steered her away from the window and began walking her to the front garden. "I — I —" she stammered feebly.

"A nice hot towel on your brow and a cup of tea would probably make you right as rain again. You've got your niece's wedding coming up, haven't you? Aunt Petunia was saying. You don't want to be under the weather for that, now do you?"

"I suppose not..." Harry took his arm from around her. She looked back uncertainly. "I could have sworn —"

"You just need some rest", Harry said firmly, but still keeping his voice smooth and calming. "I'll tell Aunt Petunia you dropped by. She'll be sorry she missed you."

Yvonne Martin wandered off down Privet Lane, shaking her head with bewilderment. Counting to ten in his head before he moved, Harry bolted for the kitchen door and threw it open. He held out his hand and bellowed, "*Finite Incantatem!*"

Plates and glasses on their way to a cupboard fell to the floor and shattered. The mop fell over and splattered soapy water on the fridge door. The scrubbing rag flopped limply onto the counter. And his aunt glared at him angrily, making him wonder whether he was up for a wandless duel with a completely inexperienced witch operating on pure rage.

"You can't *do* that!" he yelled at her. "Yvonne Martin was standing right *there*, looking in the window at everything you were doing. What were you thinking?"

She lifted her chin defiantly and crossed her arms. "*I* am over the age of seventeen, unlike *you*..."

"But you're letting Muggles see you do magic! It doesn't matter what your age is — you're not supposed to *do* that! Plus, you don't know what you're doing. You haven't studied any of the theory... you don't even have a wand. Please, *please* stop doing magic until Mrs. Figg looks into your situation a little further..."

"Oh, pooh to that. I'm having more fun than I ever thought possible, and you want me to exercise *restraint*?"

"Yes!" he screamed back at her. "Or at least — do some *reading* first. I — I can give you some of my old spell books. You should sit down and try to understand that magic is about balance, and when you throw the balance off —"

"*Read?* I can do *this* and you want me to sit around *reading*?"

"Yes", he said firmly. "Look — I may not be seventeen yet, but I am Head Boy of Hogwarts. I've had six years of magical education, I won the Triwizard Tournament, I dueled with Lord Voldemort, survived the Killing Curse and learned to overcome the other two Unforgivable Curses. I killed a basilisk when I was twelve and I've flown on a Hippogriff, besides a slew of other things I can't tell you. So for *once* can you bloody well admit that I know more about something than you do?" His voice had become very loud.

She was suddenly silent and looked a bit sulky. "All right", she finally said, as petulant as a small child. "Get me these books." She moved toward the broken plates and glasses. "But can I just —"

"No," he said quickly. "I'll clean them up. I'll buy you new ones. Just — just *stop doing magic!*"

He brought his first- and second-year spellbooks to her in the living room, where she was sitting watching the television with her arms crossed. Sighing, he cleaned up the mess in the kitchen and then returned to his room. He wanted nothing more than to collapse on the bed in exhaustion, but he noticed a letter on his desk from Hermione. All other thoughts left his head.

Dear Harry,

I've found her! Margaret Dougherty lives in the village of Appleby Magna, in Leicestershire. I've spoken on the telephone with her. She goes by Maggie, by the way, not Peggy. I pretended to be a reporter writing about her village, and why people came to live there and what life is like for the villagers. I don't think she suspected a thing. She teaches at St. John Moore School, in Appleby Magna. Both of her parents were also teachers. They're retired. They moved to Leicestershire in 1973, after their daughter Valerie died from leukemia. Evidently, when they were in London at St. Michael's hospital, they met a family from Appleby Magna — the mother also

had cancer, so they were in the same unit rather a lot — and they wanted to move to London so she'd be closer to St. Michael's. The Doughertys wanted to move away from London, to try to put the loss of their daughter behind them, so they moved into the Leicestershire house and paid the other family rent. They also taught at St. John's.

The Doughertys tried to adopt for a number of years, but most agencies thought they were too old. They adopted Maggie in 1979, through an agency that specialized in placing older children for adoption, instead of babies, which is what most people want. Maybe you can find out more about that when you go see her. (We might be able to find Annie if we can learn more about the agency). Her parents are out of the country on holiday for the rest of the month, so it would be best to do it before they get back.

Call me when you've received this. I'm so excited!

Love from Hermione

He went back downstairs to ring Hermione, checking on his aunt first, who was starting to read *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1*. He was glad his uncle wasn't home yet. When Hermione answered, Harry tried not to laugh at the way she was talking a mile a minute. He was feeling a little more cheerful. She said all of the same things she'd said in the letter, but delivered breathlessly, and Harry waited patiently while she ran out of things to say. After a moment's pause, she asked, "Don't you have anything to say, Harry?"

"Well, you seemed to be saying enough for both of us", he answered, still trying not to laugh. "One thing I don't understand — why am *I* going to see her instead of you?"

"You're Ron's best friend, too, so why not you?" She sighed. "Unfortunately, since Minerva and my parents don't know about this, I can't go. What would I tell them? What excuse would I give? I don't even know for certain whether Minerva would think telling Maggie Dougherty she's a witch would be a good idea."

"Well, I'm sure she has an inkling that she has some unusual abilities."

"Yes, but — with everything that's happened —"

"Right", he said quietly. Jeffries had evidently disappeared without a trace after he'd recognized Harry, and after his aunt had thrown him

backwards with a gesture. The Muggle press had been full of speculation that he'd really been a fake (many of the same reporters had been gushing about "the miracle worker") who'd evidently taken the money and scrambled off to the Caymans or some other place with numbered bank accounts. The Ministry had also been looking for him, and Dumbledore's operatives as well. Suddenly, the biggest news story was that there appeared to be *no* Rodney Jeffries.

Harry wondered whether the Ministry had `taken care of' Jeffries and were just pretending to look for him. He also wondered whether Voldemort and the Death Eaters had done something to him.

"At any rate, I can't very well say, `Oh, I'm going off to Leicestershire to find Ron's long-lost sister who thinks she's a Muggle', so I've got to stay here." She sounded very grumpy about this; Harry could tell she was thinking that there was a definite downside to having Professor McGonagall stay with her.

"Well how do you expect *me* to be able to go see her?"

"I've got it all worked out", she said quickly, and Harry realized he should have known. Evidently, he was to tell Ron and Ginny about it and get Draco Malfoy to drive them all up to Leicestershire on the pretext that they were on their way to Scotland, to celebrate Harry's birthday at the end of the month. "Does that mean you're not going to be coming to Ascog for my birthday?" he asked, unable to keep the hurt out of his voice.

"No, but Minerva already arranged ages ago for me to have a Portkey to take me. That's why I can't give the excuse that *I* need to go on this trip to get to Bute also. I already have a way. If I change her plans, I'll have to give her a reason. Oh, I am so *jealous* that the four of you will be meeting her and I won't!"

"I'm sure you will eventually. I can't believe you did all this! The whole Weasley family will be in your debt forever..."

"What about you? I wouldn't have been able to find her if you hadn't given me a name."

He wished he could hug her suddenly. It was so amazing! Ron and Ginny would be meeting their older sister!

After he rang off, he dialed Mrs. Figg's number and when she answered he asked for Draco. The other boy answered the phone with an irritated edge to his voice.

"What do *you* want?"

Harry hesitated. "I need your help. Actually, *Ginny* needs your help."

"Ginny?" He sounded a little less hostile.

"Yes. Has she ever — has she ever mentioned to you something that happened in 1979? During the Easter hols?"

"Um, Harry, Ginny wasn't even *born* in 1979. And neither was I. Why would she mention anything of the sort?"

Harry hesitated, then plunged in and told Draco Malfoy about the Weasley sisters and their abduction, and that he and Hermione had found the younger sister.

"You're not serious!" he said, unable to keep the awe out of his voice. "Ginny will be —" He stopped. "She'll be very grateful to you", he said flatly. Harry could tell he was itching to accuse Harry of doing it just to get on Ginny's good side.

"Yeah, well she'll be grateful to you too, if you drive us up to Leicestershire next week to see her. After driving to Devon to get Ginny and Ron first, of course. We have to go up to Scotland anyway later in the week; we can just leave a few days early. Monday suit you?"

"Hold on, hold on — you want me to be the driver? You're just telling me this because I can drive you?"

"Erm — it was Hermione's idea —" he floundered.

"And did it occur to her that I don't actually own a car? That Figg isn't bloody likely to let me just make off with her car and go to Devon *or* Leicestershire, let alone Scotland?"

Harry drew his mouth into a line. "Oh. Well — could you ask her?"

"I don't know how much good that will do. What about Katie?"

"What about her?"

"Find out if she can borrow her dad's car. Then you can have your new *girlfriend* with you for your birthday. And I can help with the driving still, so it's not one person all the time. It'll be a bleeding all-day trip, going to Devon and then Leicestershire from Surrey."

Harry swallowed. Was Draco Malfoy perhaps a little too eager to have Katie come? Did he want Ginny to see Harry and Katie together?

"I can try. The worst thing that can happen is Sam says no. Or Katie does."

"Well, even though you're obviously not Sam's favorite person right now, it still seems more likely than my chances of getting Figg's car for more than a week." He didn't tell Draco Malfoy, but when he'd hung up he

had to admit to himself that Draco was probably right about Mrs. Figg and her car. At lunch the next day, he told Katie everything that was going on and proposed Draco's idea.

"That'd be nice — a week off and a trip to Scotland, stopping in the country in Leicestershire first. And I'd like to be on hand to help you celebrate your birthday", she added, looking a little shy for a moment. They hadn't gone out that weekend, but had talked on the phone a little when she was confident that her father wasn't around eavesdropping.

"Well, it would be Ron, Ginny and Draco Malfoy besides you and me, and Draco could split the driving with you, as he has a license. You're sure you'd like to do this?"

"Yes. I had no idea about the Weasleys..."

Harry had a sudden thought. "I'll bet your dad knew, though. When did he finish Hogwarts?"

"In 1976."

"Two years before my mum and dad, then. And he became an Auror right away?" She nodded. "Right. Then he was probably one of the many people searching all over for the Weasley girls. He might be very interested in letting you go along to find out if Maggie Dougherty is really Peggy Weasley."

"He might, he might..." she mused, looking in her father's direction. Sam was lying back in the sun with his shirt off, his many tattoos showing through the reddish hair on his chest.

"So you'll ask him? While we have the car, I'm sure Aber — I mean — Dick won't mind picking him up in the mornings. Or Nigel could."

"All right. I'll ask over tea tonight. I'll let you know tomorrow; if I call you right after, he'll think it's a very big deal."

"It is."

"I know. I just don't want him to balk, so I'm going to be careful. We've almost started behaving normally around each other again."

Harry agreed, then turned to look at Sam himself.

Everything hinged on him.

* * *

To Harry's and Katie's amazement, Sam agreed to let them borrow the car. Katie drove down to Surrey Monday morning to pick up Harry and Draco. Since Harry was actually moving out of the Dursley's house now, he had to pack all of his belongings in his trunk, plus he had cartons with the books

he'd used in his first six years at Hogwarts (minus what he'd loaned his aunt), loads of rolls of parchment, and Hedwig (he still needed to buy a new broomstick). Katie discreetly put an enlargement charm on the interior of the car's boot, so everything (but Hedwig) would fit. His uncle had already left for work, but his aunt came to the door to see him off.

"Er — goodbye, Aunt Petunia. Read those books I gave you, all right? And talk to Mrs. Figg if you have questions. I'll — I'll send you an owl when I've reached Scotland."

She nodded tersely, then unexpectedly gave him a quick hug and a peck on the cheek, her eyes glittering, before disappearing into the house. Harry looked at the closed door for a moment before turning to walk to the car.

When they reached Mrs. Figg's, Draco was standing out in front with his hands deep in his pockets, looking impatient. "About time you got here", he grumbled as he let himself into the back seat. Then he groaned. "Oh, bloody hell — I've got to ride with your owl? I want to sit up front."

"Sorry — I'm already sitting here. You'll sit up front when you're driving. I wanted to keep Hedwig with us so we could contact the Weasleys if there are any delays. We can't just call them on the telephone. Once we actually reach the Burrow, Mrs. Weasley is going to be taking care of Hedwig for me for a few days. Then she'll be sending her on to Ascog."

Draco made some more indistinct grumbling noises as Katie started the car again. "Where's your bag?" Harry asked him.

Now Draco Malfoy looked very smug. He pulled what appeared to be a small snuff box out of his jacket pocket. "Shrinking charm. How to travel light. Oh, the joys of being *of age*", he emphasized, for Harry's benefit. "Being able to do magic whenever and wherever..."

"...as long as Muggles *don't see it*," Katie reminded him with a slight growl in her voice as she turned onto the High Street. "Listen — there's a lot of driving to be done today. You haven't had your license for very long. Are you sure you're up to it?"

Draco shrugged. "How hard can it be? And anyway, when we came back from Swansea, I drove the entire time. That's farther than Devon."

"If you're sure... Why don't you give him the details, Harry?" Harry pulled out the notebook where he and Katie had worked out the route.

"Right. So, now we're on the High Street. In a minute we'll be on the Guildford Road, and then we'll take the Givens Grove Roundabout to the

Leatherhead Bypass Road. Then we take the Knoll Roundabout, get back on the Leatherhead Bypass Road —"

"Why in the hell do we get *off* the Leatherpants Bypass —"

"*Leatherhead* Bypass."

"— just to get on it again?"

"Obviously in order to induce you to ask stupid questions. We worked out that it's the best way. Now pay attention —"

Draco groaned. Harry continued to explain their route to Devon, finishing with, "You'll be driving for about an hour and a half, I reckon."

"An hour and a half!"

"I thought you drove all the way to Little Whinging from Swansea?"

"Well — with plenty of stops..."

"Katie will be driving for almost that long before you switch. She'd switch a little later, but we can't very well pull over on a busy motorway. After the two of you switch back, Katie will complete the drive to Exeter, about another half hour. We should arrive there by twelve-thirty. We can find a nice pub for lunch, and then Katie will drive on to Ottery St. Catchpole and the Burrow, which is roughly another hour. We'll leave the Burrow after collecting Ginny and Ron — hopefully no later than three-thirty — and then it'll be your turn to drive again, so you can take us back to Exeter —"

"Where we'll arrive just in time for tea. Good."

"— and then you'll keep driving for another half-hour after we have *tea*," Harry went on. "Katie will drive for about an hour-and-a-half, and then you can do the last hour, getting us to the Four Friars pub on Stoney Lane in Appleby Magna at around eight-thirty. We've already called ahead for rooms."

Draco slapped his hands together. "*Which* is about the right time for another little something before turning in for the night..."

"Time for 'a little something', eh?" Harry teased with a grin. "Who *are* you, really? Winnie-the-Pooh?"

"You expect me to drive all day —"

"*Less than half the time*," Katie reminded him, with gritted teeth, as she gripped the steering wheel.

"— without proper sustenance?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "No one is trying to starve you. I'd like to see us *try* to get away from the Burrow without a huge picnic basket of food from

Mrs. Weasley. You know she won't let us go without enough provisions to take us all the way up to the Orkneys."

Katie spoke while looking ahead at the road. "Does she know where Ginny and Ron are going, and why?"

"No. She just thinks we're all driving up to Ascog. She knows we're stopping in Leicestershire, but she thinks it's just because we need to turn in for the night."

Katie nodded. "I just hope you don't get your hopes up, Harry. This *could* go badly wrong..."

He sighed and leaned back. "I know. But Ron — Ron's so excited! He didn't even *know* he had older sisters until I told him. And Ginny —"

"Yes?" Draco said, leaning forward suspiciously. Katie made a sudden turn and he fell into Hedwig's cage, swearing colorfully. The snowy owl made some very indignant noises and flapped her wings.

"Oh. Sorry, Draco", Katie said with an air of mock innocence. "Aren't you wearing your seat belt?" She looked sideways at Harry, a mischievous smile pulling at the corner of her mouth. He grinned, looking straight ahead.

"What does Ginny know about this?"

"I told her the truth", Harry said. "That if it wasn't for you I wouldn't have been able to get into Dudley's room to use his computer and look for her sister." He heard a stunned silence behind him.

"You *told* her that? So — so she thinks I have something to do with finding her sister?"

"Well, I wasn't lying about that, was I? And you *are* helping with the driving. We'd have to do the trip in two days if Katie were going to drive the whole time. She'd be completely done in."

Katie sighed. "I *still* might be."

Harry tried to give her a reassuring smile as they zoomed off toward Exeter.

* * *

They managed to leave the Burrow with only two picnic hampers, which they placed in the magically enlarged boot. Molly Weasley hugged and kissed Ron and Harry and Ginny repeatedly. She hugged and kissed Draco once only, still looking a little unsure about whether he would accept this, and she nodded somewhat coolly at Katie.

"So — what are the sleeping arrangements to be?" she asked in crisp tones.

"Girls in one room, boys in the other", Katie answered promptly; she'd had this from her dad already. Molly sniffed.

"You're the eldest, but I can't say I know you very well, except that you're friends with the twins. How do I know I can trust my children with you? After all, your father —"

"— was my mother's friend and by all accounts a good Auror, up to and including the day he stopped his wife from putting Cruciatus on Katie." Harry had never spoken to Ron's and Ginny's mother this way, but he couldn't stay silent. He stepped between the two of them. "Sam Bell had the chance to be the same sort of traitor to my parents that Peter Pettigrew was, but he wouldn't do it. And because he had that kind of integrity, he accidentally killed the woman he loved and had to be apart from his daughter for ten years. He had dementors absorbing every happy thought and memory he'd ever had for an entire decade." He shook, remembering his time in Azkaban in his other life. "And he's my friend now, too. I won't hear anyone saying anything against Sam Bell."

Molly Weasley's mouth was open in shock. When he was done, she closed her mouth, and surprisingly, smiled at him. "Harry. Every day you're more like your parents. I know Ron couldn't have a more loyal friend, and it's clear that Sam Bell has a good friend in you, also. I was simply going to say that your father", and she nodded at Katie, "was an Auror, but *you're* not. And neither are Draco and Ron. Granted, the three of you are of age and that might make up for the fact that Harry and Ginny are not, but still — a mother can't help but worry. If — if you all were attacked —" She stopped, reluctant to go further in describing what could happen to them on the road.

Katie put her hand on Mrs. Weasley's arm. "No, I'm not an Auror, Mrs. Weasley. But", she lowered her voice, "I'll tell you a secret. I've passed the entrance exams, and I'm going to start training as an Auror in September. Following in my dad's footsteps." She was smiling shyly, and yet also with pride. Harry couldn't help smiling at her also. Mrs. Weasley looked very relieved.

"Oh! I had no idea, dear! Well, well — aren't you just the dark horse and all..."

Katie shook her hair into her face shyly. "I've wanted this all my life. I still haven't told my dad, though, so if you could —"

Molly put her finger to her lips. "I'm the very soul of discretion. Don't you worry. Well! If you passed those tests I daresay you're at least on your way to being an Auror." She sighed. "I'll try to stop worrying. You say you're stopping in Leicestershire tonight?"

"We're having tea in Exeter first. Then we'll be at the Four Friars in Appleby Magna for the night."

"Send Hedwig if there's an emergency", Harry told her. "She's rather large for us to have her in the car with us right now, with three people in the back seat. Ron's bringing Pigwidgeon so we can owl you when we get to the Four Friars, but he has a much smaller cage than Hedwig, so that's not so bad."

With some more hugging and kissing — for which even Katie qualified this time — they were off to Exeter. Ron had insisted upon sitting up front alongside Draco Malfoy while he was driving, because there was more leg room in front, and because he was holding Pigwidgeon's cage on his lap and the very small owl became very agitated when Ron tried getting into the back seat. So Harry ended up sitting in the middle with Katie to his left and Ginny to his right. He did his best to just look straight ahead, but once he happened to notice Ginny looking daggers at Katie, who was trying to ignore this, although Harry could tell she'd seen Ginny's glare. Harry felt somewhat irritated with Ginny; she'd chosen Malfoy, why'd she have to go and be shirty with Katie?

After they had tea in a small pub in Exeter, Katie took over the driving again, and now Ginny was sitting in the back with Draco to her left and Harry to her right. Harry wasn't any more comfortable about this. It seemed a very long drive to the village where Maggie Dougherty lived.

* * *

"What do you mean, it's flooded?"

"I mean it's flooded. That rain we had two nights ago overflowed the gutters and the water found a space between the shingles and seeped down into the ceiling. The room next to it's all right, and we're trying to keep the smell of mildew from spreading, but —"

"But you only have two rooms to let and only one of them isn't under water", Harry finished tiredly. He turned to Katie and Ron, standing on either side of him at the pub's bar while he talked to the publican. He

turned around, peering cautiously at the man, then whispered to the two of them, "What do you reckon? Could one of you cast a drying charm on it to clean it up?"

Katie shook her head. "Not a good idea, Harry. He *knows* the room is ruined."

"How about a memory charm, too?"

She sighed. "I can't justify it. I did that one on Adam Justice because he might have remembered the magical signatures otherwise. But we can't just go ahead and do magic and then memory charm someone to cover it up. Besides, if I make him forget that the roof needs to be repaired, the next time it rains, he'll have flooding again. It's not fair to him."

She turned to the publican. "Can we see the room that *is* available?" He nodded and led them up the stairs at the end of the bar, then down a short corridor. Harry wrinkled his nose; he could smell the damp already.

"Here we are", he said grandly, as though showing them a suite at the Ritz. There were two beds, each large enough for two (thin) people. A narrow couch stood against the wall between a white wall-mounted sink with separate hot and cold taps and rust stains in the basin, and a door which led to a cramped room with a shower and nothing else, including towel bars and towels.

"The W.C. is the door to your left when you come upstairs. The hot water tap on the sink doesn't work. Trust me; if you turn it on, you won't like what comes out."

"Erm — what about the shower? Both hot and cold working there?"

"Yeah, that's all right. So. What's the plan?" He clapped his hands together while the three of them looked around uncertainly at the room. One of the beds had a blood-colored coverlet while the other had a dun-colored one with a black footprint stain right in the middle. The lighting was too dim to see very clearly (Harry had a feeling that was deliberate) and the clock on the table between the beds was flashing "12.00" over and over; no one had ever bothered to set it.

Ron frowned, looking around. "What, no television? I thought I'd at least finally get to see television, staying in a Muggl —"

Harry trod on his foot suddenly, making him yell in pain. Katie hastily said, "We'll take it. It's fine, really. I'm sorry you've had trouble with your roof." She smiled charmingly at him (at least, Harry hoped the publican

would think it was charming, and that he'd forgotten what Ron had said) and took the key from him. When he'd gone, she turned to glare at Ron.

"You know, I might expect something like that from Fred and George. But I thought you had a little more sense, Ron Weasley." She sounded very grown-up. Ron set his jaw stubbornly.

"I was only saying —"

"— the word Muggle. What were you thinking? Now", she said purposefully, and she opened her shoulderbag and withdrew her wand. "I'll set about making this place a little more comfortable — and vermin-free — while you two and Draco and Ginny get all of the luggage from the car. And *you*", she said, nodding at Ron. "Make yourself useful. Put a good locking charm on the car, including the boot. We can't have someone breaking into it and discovering Harry's trunk and boxes of magic books. Understand?"

Ron grumbled an assent and left with Harry. "Who put her in charge?" he muttered as they returned to the bar.

"Your mum, actually, if you want to know. If you want to take it up with her —"

"No, thanks", he said quickly. "I'm tired and I'm still not going to get to see television, but I'm not *stupid*. I need to send her Pigwidgeon, so she knows we're here. Thank goodness we don't have a telephone, or she'd do something like call and find out we're all staying in one room."

They explained their predicament to Draco and Ginny, who had been sitting at a corner table in the bar, drinking Cokes and eating crisps. They all went to the car and retrieved their belongings, and Katie's as well. Once they were in the room again, Harry's jaw dropped. Katie had been very careful about not letting them in until she was certain the publican wasn't with them. When they entered, all the four of them could do was stare around at the transformation Katie had wrought.

"This is our bed, Ginny", Katie told her, indicating a far more generously proportioned bed than Harry remembered from his first viewing of the room. The other bed had been similarly enlarged, and the couch was as well. Everything also looked much cleaner, and there was much more illumination. Harry checked his watch; the clock was even set correctly.

"The three of you will have to figure out who's on the bed and who gets the couch", she said to Harry, Ron and Draco. "I'm knackered. I'm going to

change for bed in the shower room. You three can figure out what you want to do."

As soon as she was gone, Ron said, "I'll kip on the couch. It's a hardship, but —"

"A hardship! *I'm* taking the couch", Draco Malfoy declared.

Ron protested, even more loudly, Draco Malfoy fired another volley, and finally, Ginny yelled, "Quiet! The pair of you! You two —" she pointed at Ron and Harry, "take the bed tonight. Draco did a lot of driving. And if either of you has to share with him, I know the rest of us will never get to sleep for your bickering, so since the two of *you* are best friends, why don't you share with each other instead of forcing one of you to be with someone we all know you hate!"

Ron and Harry looked a bit awkward. "I wouldn't say *hate*", Ron countered feebly. "I mean, yeah, I don't want to sleep in the same bed with him —"

"What, afraid you won't be able to resist the urge to rip my clothes off?" Malfoy smirked, his arms crossed. Ron's ears turned very red.

"I don't —" Ron started to say.

"Oh, sod off, the pair of you", Harry said suddenly, to cover up Ron's awkwardness. "I wasn't even claiming the couch for myself. We don't have any problem with you getting it, Malfoy. Thanks for driving", he added wryly.

Now the blond boy was smirking at Harry. "Oh, *I* see. You've been wanting to get into bed with Weasley —"

"Ron to you. I'm so sorry to deprive you of his company, Malfoy. Jealous are we?"

"Hey!" Ron exclaimed. "Cut that out!"

Harry and Ginny erupted into laughter while Ron and Draco, in disgust, went to unpack their bags (after Draco enlarged his again). He looked her in the eye while they both laughed. It felt so good to laugh with her. She looked at him as well, and his heart turned over.

"Hullo, you", he said suddenly.

"Hullo yourself", she said quietly.

"So — tomorrow we're going to go get you a sister."

She gave him a small smile. "Looks that way."

Katie emerged from the shower room and Ginny quickly gathered up her things and took a turn changing her clothes. Harry's throat went dry

when he saw Katie, even though he'd undressed her down to her underwear. She was wearing a red chemise with very thin straps which came to mid-thigh, and no dressing gown. He noticed that Ron and Draco had also come to a screeching halt in their bedtime preparations when she appeared. As she climbed into bed she looked at the three of them, still in their traveling clothes.

"Don't let me stop you. You can't faze me. At Hog's End your brothers", she nodded at Ron, "are always walking about in their underwear, and I've already seen Harry's bare bum. Quite a nice one it is, too. Well, good night." She punched her pillow a few times and curled up under the coverlet, closing her eyes.

Ron's and Draco's jaws had dropped as they swiveled their heads to look at Harry, who was finding it hard not to smirk. "You know", he said, nodding at Draco. "The Sleeping Incident."

"Yeah, but you said —"

"Sssh! She's trying to sleep!"

"But — but —"

"Just finish getting changed and climb into your couch before Ginny gets back out here", Harry ordered him.

Soon the five of them were breathing peacefully in the dark. Harry stared up at the moonlight on the ceiling, thinking about laughing with Ginny and seeing Katie in her chemise.

"What am I going to do, Sandy?" he groaned to her.

"Go to sleep, Harry Potter."

"Oh, that's helpful", he started to say, when four other voices, echoing the small green snake, but in English, said:

"Go to sleep, Harry!"

He laughed in the darkness before rolling over and closing his eyes.

* * *

They pulled up in front of No. 10 Highgrove Street at ten o'clock. Ron and Ginny stared nervously at the front door of the stately Georgian home, set back from the road in a formal garden. The banks of windows stared back at them blankly. They all emerged from the car and started to walk toward the door, but then Harry had a thought.

"Wait — we can't all just go barging into her life like this. The moment she sees Ginny, she'll wonder what the hell is going on, for one thing."

"Why?" Ginny asked, her brow furrowed.

"Don't you remember how much your sisters looked like you in those old pictures, before they disappeared? You think she won't notice? You should wait in the car. And Ron —" He bit his lip. "You should wait, too."

"Why? She's not likely to connect me with —"

"Not because of that. Because — well — she's a Seeress. Hermione found her web site. That's how we figured out she was the right Margaret Dougherty. Your sister seems to be the real thing. She'd leave Trelawney in the dust. But the thing is — on the web site she talks about seeing people's auras. She'll definitely be able to tell that you're different."

Ron turned with bewilderment to Ginny. "What's a web site? Because if it has something to do with spiders, I want no part of it."

Harry rolled his eyes and ignored this. "Now, here's what we should do — Draco and Katie should go to the door first and try to convince her to let them in..."

"So you're waiting, too? Why?"

"Well — you're likely to have a slightly scary aura because of the werewolf thing, but with Voldemort after me, mine's not likely to be much better. We don't want to frighten her." He couldn't tell him that his sister would immediately be able to see *two* auras around him. That would require far too much explanation.

"So. The three of us will wait in the car, while you —"

"But — but what do we tell her?" Katie said, clearly uncomfortable at being given this responsibility.

"Just tell her — well, okay, she knows she's adopted. So tell her that you're friends with some people from her birth family who've been looking for her, and would she be interested in meeting them. Just be honest about it. We can get to the whole oh-by-the-way-you're-a-magical-person-just-like-us thing later."

Now Draco Malfoy was the one who appeared nervous. "Who do we say we are again?"

Harry shrugged. "Tell her. Say you're her little sister's boyfriend. You helped drive her here from Devon. How hard is that?"

The two of them still looked uncertain as Harry, Ron and Ginny returned to the car and they walked toward the door. Harry saw Katie use the large brass knocker, and after a minute, the door opened.

"Is that her?" Ginny whispered hoarsely, gripping Harry's arm as she peered around him toward the house. He nodded.

"That's her."

They waited while an exchange occurred that they couldn't hear, and then they saw her disappear into the house, Draco Malfoy following. Katie turned around and gave a signal for them to come.

"Windows will be opened."

Harry stopped short, letting Ginny and Ron walk ahead of him into the large front hall of the house, with a grand staircase sweeping up to a landing with a large arched window. He didn't have time to ask Sandy what she meant. (Not that that ever did much good.) He followed the others through an open archway to a large sunny room furnished with oversized, comfortable white-slipcovered couches and chairs and lots of green plants and Persian rugs.

The moment Maggie Dougherty saw Ginny she swallowed and said, "Is that her? That's my little sister?"

Katie nodded, looking like she was trying not to cry, as Maggie stepped forward and enveloped Ginny in a sisterly hug. Ginny hugged her back, crying freely.

"Oh — I can't believe we've *found* you!" she exclaimed. They held each other tightly, rocking back and forth, both crying now, and Harry was amazed how similar they looked, except for the eye color. The older sister had also cut her hair quite short. It roved over her head in orange curls, even shorter than Hermione's hair. Harry thought Ginny would look quite nice with her hair that way.

Finally, they all sat down. She was shaking her head, looking at her five visitors. "I can't believe this. It's all just out of the blue..."

"Mum will be so excited!" Ginny exclaimed, before seeing Harry's scowling face.

"*Mum?*" Maggie Dougherty frowned. "What —?"

"The thing is", Harry said quickly. "There's something we have to tell you, or the rest, about how you came to be adopted, won't make any sense..."

She looked at him with her eyes narrowed. "You have two —"

"Right. I know." He stopped her before she could finish. "But we're not talking about me right now. There's no way to build up to this, so I'm just going to say it. Margaret Dougherty, you're a witch."

She looked at him blankly. "I know. And call me Maggie."

Ron's jaw dropped. "You *know?*"

She frowned. "Of course I know. You don't just make things happen with your mind and see the future without figuring out something like this. The question, is — how do you lot know?" She squinted at Ron. "And what's wrong with your aura —?"

"Well", Ginny said quickly, "I'm a witch too. And Ron — our brother —" she gestured, "he's a wizard. Katie's also a witch, and Harry and Draco are also wizards. Our whole family are magical, as a matter of fact."

She sat back, her arms crossed. "Indeed? The whole family?" She looked somewhat skeptical.

"Yes", Harry said, ignoring her unbelief. "You may be aware that you have abilities that other humans around you don't — at least, as far as you know, as we tend to be somewhat secretive — but what I don't think you realize is that there's an entire British wizarding society that lives side-by-side with British Muggles —"

"What?"

"Non-magic people. I didn't find out about it myself until I was eleven and received my letter of acceptance to Hogwarts. That's a school of witchcraft and wizardry. I'm going to be starting my seventh and final year in September. I'm Head Boy. Draco here is a prefect, and so's Ginny. Katie just finished school there; she was a prefect too. Ron is captain of our house Quidditch team, and Draco is captain of his house team —"

"Captain of *what*? I'm afraid you've lost me. And none of this explains —"

"What?"

She sighed. "None of this explains why I can't remember anything from before the age of seven, and why I didn't grow up with my true family." She looked disgruntled.

Harry drew his lips into a line. "That's actually something of a mystery for us still, as well, although I have a theory about what probably happened."

He explained to her what Molly Weasley had told him and Hermione about Bill and Charlie taking their sisters off to play in the park in Ottery St. Catchpole, and the two girls disappearing. "I think whoever took the pair of you was a wizard — or maybe more than one — using a spell called *Tempus fugit*."

"*Time flies*?" she said, mystified.

"So you know Latin?"

She sniffed. "I should think so. Greek as well. I'm the Classics Mistress at the school."

Ginny smiled. "Our mum used to be a teacher, too."

"But — but what is this spell? And I didn't know there were really such things as spells. I just know that sometimes I want something to happen and if I think very, very hard about it, I can sometimes make it happen. It doesn't always work. I didn't manage to send my last boyfriend to a South Sea Island surrounded by sharks, for instance. He's still a solicitor in the village." She smirked and so did Ginny, and Harry could tell that she liked her sister.

"You'd need a wand and knowledge of a pretty powerful traveling charm to pull that one off", Katie told her, also smiling.

"Wand? As in — magic wand?" She sat back, looking skeptical again. "You're not serious."

"Completely", Katie informed her. She pulled her wand from her shoulder bag, Ron pulled his out of a long pocket on the side of his jeans, just above his knee, and Draco Malfoy pulled his from a holster under his shirt, strapped to his left arm. Maggie still shook her head.

"What about you?" she said to Harry and Ginny.

"We're not of-age yet. You have to be seventeen to legally do magic outside of school —"

"*Legally?*"

"Yeah", he told her. "We have laws, and law enforcement, and then there's the Minister —"

"*Minister?*"

"— and a prison, and wizarding money —"

She stood and paced. "I don't know how gullible you all think I am, but —"

Ginny followed her. "It's true. All of it. There's an entire magical world out there, and you should have been part of it. You should have gone to Hogwarts, like the rest of us. You —"

Harry suddenly grabbed Ron's wand from his grasp and strode over to Maggie, putting his hand on her shoulder and, touching each of them with the wand in turn and thinking the fastest thoughts he could, he said, "*Tempus fugit!*"

Everything stopped but them. Maggie and Harry looked at Ginny, whose mouth was open, in mid-sentence. Ron was looking startled at no

longer having his wand in his hand, his eyes wide and unblinking, and Draco Malfoy had evidently found a spot on his jaw to worry with his fingers, which did not move. Katie was caught in mid-blink, her eyes closed. Maggie looked at the four of them, who did not even appear to be drawing breath, and then she looked at Harry, swallowing.

"I thought you said you weren't allowed to do that!" she said, her voice shaking.

"I know, but I had to get you to *see*, to *understand*. This is what I was trying to tell you. I think whoever abducted you and your sister put both of you under the *Tempus fugit* spell and had you far, far away before anyone even knew you were gone..."

But she again didn't seem to be listening to Harry. "I've never done anything like *this*", she breathed, waving her hand before Ginny's face, getting no response.

"You've never had a magic wand. Wands help focus our magic. It's best to have your own wand, though. Since this is Ron's, I wasn't sure it was going to work."

She walked around Ron and then Draco, then back to Ginny, before moving on to Katie. "I — I think — I think I remember now. There was a man in a long cloak... taking me and another girl — she was older than me, and she also had red hair — through a dream world where everyone was frozen like this —"

Suddenly she collapsed on the floor, shuddering, and Harry went to her. She seemed almost to be having a seizure, and Harry realized that if she was remembering her abduction, her mind was breaking through some very powerful memory charms. Could that cause her brain-damage? he wondered. He decided not to compound the problem and took the spell off the two of them, and everyone else started moving again. Unfortunately, that seemed to throw her even more, and she clutched at Harry desperately, the most frightened look on her face that he had ever seen on anyone.

"*Oh God!*" she cried, gripping his shirt in her hands. "I — *I remember now!*"

Harry was dragged down onto his knees, beside her. He looked at the others, at a loss, as Maggie Dougherty huddled on the floor, sobbing and shaking. She had gone very white and sweat had broken out on her brow.

Ron's and Ginny's long-lost sister held onto him fiercely, quivering madly, her eyes black with pain as she choked out the words, "*I remember*"

everything... "

Fortress

"I remember everything."

Ginny went on her knees next to Harry and put her arms around her sister. Maggie continued to shiver and perspire. Finally, Ron went down next to her, too, and placed his hand on her head, closing his eyes.

"Ssshhh —" he told her softly. Slowly, a calm seemed to flow into her from Ron, and he spoke quietly to her now, although Harry couldn't hear what he was saying. Ron's voice was a soothing murmur in her ear. Her eyes were closed and she was clearly paying close attention to him, to her youngest brother. Soon she stopped shaking, and her brother and sister helped her to move to a large comfortable armchair, where they perched on the arms. Katie summoned a glass of cold water with a wave of her hand and brought it to Maggie.

Ginny took it from Katie with a hostile look, then handed it to her sister, who drank it thirstily. Harry looked down and saw that he was still holding Ron's wand, and he handed it back to him, getting a nod in return. Harry felt terrible; Ron had every right to be upset with him, yet he was calmly stroking his sister's hair, still speaking in low, gentle tones, like a mother soothing a colicky baby.

Finally, Maggie looked Harry in the eye. *"Thank you,"* she said shakily. "You — you made me remember —"

Harry swallowed. "That's — that's what I hoped. But I didn't expect you to — to have that reaction. Stupid really —"

"Stupid!" Katie exploded at him unexpectedly. "That's the least of it. How in the hell do you even know about the *existence* of that spell, Harry? That's Dark Magic! I know about it because of some independent research I've done, but that's not even covered in seventh-year Defense Against the Dark Arts!" She looked slightly frightened of him for a moment.

Harry swallowed. "I know about it because — because someone put that spell on me. Last year, when I was about to go through the barrier to platform nine and three-quarters —"

Ron opened his eyes wide now. "So *that's* why you were being so queer when you got on the train!"

"Well — that's just a part of it. It's neither here nor there now. I'm just saying — I know it's Dark Magic, but I took the spell off quickly. It was just a theory that that was how the kidnapper operated, anyway —"

"No!" Maggie exclaimed suddenly. "No", she said again, more calmly. "I'm — I'm glad you did it. That's *exactly* what happened. As I said; we were moving through a dream world where no one moved, where there wasn't a breath of wind even..."

Harry was alarmed. "How long did he have you under the spell?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Why?"

He swallowed; she was frightened enough. Better not to tell her the downside of the spell just now. "Just — go on."

"He made us walk. Me and my sister", she said quietly. "My sister — " She looked like she was struggling.

"Annie", Ginny said gently.

"Annie! Yes. Her name was Annie, and she was nine, and her favorite sweet was Drooble's Best Blowing Gum! I remember!" She smiled round at them, and Ginny looked down at her sister so sweetly that Harry forgave her for every hostile glare she'd sent in Katie's direction.

"And — and our brothers Bill and Charlie took us to the village park to play. The village of — of — of Ottery St. Catchpole! Mum was — she was taking care of our little brothers..."

"Percy and the twins, Fred and George", Ron said.

"Right! Right..." she trailed off, looking like she was concentrating again. "We walked for ever so long, and when we were tired and hungry and thirsty, he went into stores and took fruit and gave it to us to eat. Things like oranges and grapes, so they were juicy." Her eyes opened wide. "We walked — to Exeter. He took us to a hospital... and then he led us to a room with two beds in it and — and —"

"What?" Harry breathed.

"Then everything was new after that. My old life just slipped away. Until today, I felt like the first thing in my life I remembered *ever* was waking up in a hospital bed with a curtain pulled round it, and a matron came to take my temperature and give me food. She told me I was a lucky girl; that everyone else in my family had been killed in the car crash. She said that they knew my name was Margaret, but I didn't appear to have any family that weren't killed in the crash, and when I recovered I would go to

live in an orphanage or into a foster home, unless someone wanted to adopt me.

"I went to sleep every night crying. Day in and day out I never remembered more of my earlier life. The doctors didn't know what to make of it. They claimed it was a psychological problem, that there was nothing physically wrong with me.

"After I'd been in hospital for a fortnight, an older couple came to see me. She had red hair, a little darker than mine, and he had light brown hair and a nice smile. When she saw me, she said right away, 'She looks so much like Valerie!' and he told me that was their daughter, who had died. I asked them about their daughter, and they seemed very glad to be able to talk about her. We talked for some time. Finally, I asked them why they'd come, and they said they'd heard that there was a little girl who'd lost her family and needed a new one. I asked them whether I could be their daughter; they were frightfully nice, and I was so very scared. I was only seven. Having a mum to tuck me in at night again was all I wanted. If I'd remembered my family, I might have wanted *them*, specifically, but I just had this enormous void where memories of my family should be. Nothing. Nothing at all.

"The doctors had already given up on me. No one could make me remember where I'd lived or gone to school or any of it. A week later, I went home with the nice couple who'd come to see me. Some time after that I officially became Maggie Dougherty, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Sean Dougherty of Appleby Magna."

Harry swallowed again. "And — and when did you discover that you're a witch?"

She looked thoughtful. "I started doing odd things not long after I came home with my new mum and dad, actually. Well, actually it started in hospital, with seeing people's auras. The doctors were sure I was brain-damaged..."

"Oh, wait!" Harry exclaimed. "Back up — who kidnapped you? What did he look like?"

She furrowed her brow. "He had a very confusing aura. Dull, muddy green. He had conflicting emotions. I didn't know then that's what his aura meant. I didn't know anything about that. He wasn't very big. Or very tall, I should say. He had a slightly round belly. He wore a long cloak. He didn't

seem very old though. Grown-up, but not thirty or forty or anything like that..."

"Maybe — nineteen or twenty?" Harry was anxious; he felt a suspicion starting to form in his mind.

She looked thoughtful. "Hard to say. I was only seven; I wasn't a very good judge of that sort of thing. Anyone who looked old enough to be at Hogwarts seemed grown-up to me — Oh! Wait! I remember Hogwarts! I mean — I remember that Bill and Charlie went there, and I was so looking forward to it... And I — I remember going to school! On a green bus that appeared and disappeared..."

Harry smiled. "Right! You went to the village school in Hogsmeade — "

"— where I learned Latin and maths and — maybe *that's* why Latin seemed to come so naturally to me when I came to live here —"

Harry shrugged. "It must have leaked through the Memory Charm, or something like that. Perhaps 'leaked' isn't quite the right word..."

"No, Harry", Katie said. "I think it is. Think about it — people who are memory charmed don't forget how to speak English, do they? It doesn't affect their language centers. Latin would be in the language centers as well, and she still remembered what she'd learnt because of that."

"Mum and Dad reckoned I must have been the daughter of a pair of Classics Masters to know so much Latin at the age of seven. They always told me that. I think that's why — that's why I grew up to do the same thing. Because I was trying somehow to be close to my real parents. Of course, my mum and dad — I mean the ones I've known — were also teachers, so they didn't mind my being a teacher a bit."

Ginny and Ron began to explain about their home now, about the Burrow's odd clocks and about calling people using the fireplace and traveling by Floo and tossing garden gnomes over the hedge into the field; and playing Quidditch in the paddock —

"Someone said that word before: *Quidditch*. I said I remembered everything, but I meant about the kidnapping. Some details of my early life are still rather fuzzy. What on earth is *Quidditch*?"

Which gave Ron the perfect excuse to launch into a detailed description of the game, and his favorite strategies as a Chaser...

"You mean", Maggie interrupted him, "you people *really* ride on brooms? You're not joking? I mean — if I brought the broom in here from

the kitchen, you'd be able to fly around the room on it?"

"Oh, hell no", Draco Malfoy broke in — brooms being one of his favorite topics. "A proper broom for flying has to have spells put on it first. The basic flying spell; a braking spell, of course, so you can stop; spells for changing direction, hovering, accelerating, decelerating — none of which will respond to a Muggle. And then there's the problem of cushioning."

"Well, yes, I *should* think that brooms would be rather, um, uncomfortable for anyone *male* —"

"That's what the cushioning charm is for. And then there's the shape of the handle. The old things they had us learning on in first year were just straight-handled brooms — if you can call those straight, with all those knots — but a proper racing broom these days will have a slight jog in the handle so that you don't kill your back bending over to hold on."

She shook her head, looking baffled. "I had no idea!" She drank some more of her water, looking a bit overwhelmed.

They talked all morning, then went into the large sunny kitchen to make sandwiches, which they ate out on the terrace after passing through the conservatory.

After chewing a bite of sandwich thoughtfully, Maggie looked up. "I remember something else. I — I was actually *at* Hogwarts. We went for a visit, for a — a Quidditch match. My brother — our brother — Charlie was playing."

"He was the greatest Seeker Hogwarts had seen in years, until Harry showed up!" Ron bragged, making Harry turn red. Draco Malfoy grumbled a bit. "Come on, Malfoy. Harry was the youngest player in a century, and *you* wouldn't have even *shared* the Quidditch cup with Gryffindor last year if Harry hadn't made it a draw on purpose." The blond boy still looked slightly disgruntled.

Later, they were having tea in the living room when Maggie asked about Ron again. "I've never seen anyone with an aura like yours. It looks — it looks more like the emanations I see from animals, rather than from humans. Except that it's edged in black. What aren't you telling me?" She turned to Harry. "And why do you have *two* auras?"

"Oh", Ginny volunteered. "That must be because Harry's an Animagus." Harry knew this wasn't the case, but he didn't argue. However, he did forget that not everyone in the room already knew about this.

Katie dropped her plate. "*What?*" She whirled on Harry. "I know we've only been going out a short time, but suddenly I feel like I don't know you at all, Harry. How could you do that? I mean, a spell here and there is one thing; everyone does a little of that before they're of-age. But how could you disregard the law so utterly and become an illegal Animagus?"

"He's not illegal", Ginny informed her archly. "He's trained up properly with McGonagall herself, and he has permission to wait until after his seventh year to register with the Ministry."

"It's true", he told Katie. "I have permission to wait."

Maggie shook her head. "Hold on, everyone. I'm afraid I'm still a bit at sea. What on earth is an Animagus?"

Ron nodded at him casually. "Harry can change from his human form into an animal. Specifically, a golden griffin."

"A *what?*"

"A golden griffin", Harry said, watching both Maggie's and Katie's amazement. "Well, you know what a griffin is, don't you?"

"A cross between a lion and an eagle."

"Right. And you know a hippogriff is a cross between a horse and a griffin, right?"

"Right. But what —"

"Well, a golden griffin is a cross between a griffin and yet another lion, so it's three-quarters lion. In fact it looks like a plain old lion most of the time, until it spreads its wings —"

"A winged lion!" she cried, her eyes wide. "So, if you're one of these people who can change into animals, you can even change into mythical animals, things that don't exist?"

They all looked calmly at her. "Oh, they exist", Katie said evenly.

Maggie raised one eyebrow. "Yeah, right. There are real griffins and hippogriffs and winged lions —"

"— and don't forget dragons", Draco Malfoy said archly, sitting up straight.

She stopped and stared. "You're serious. You're completely serious."

"There are loads of magical creatures", Ron told her. "Charlie studies dragons in Romania. Bill used to work for the wizarding bank, Gringott's, at the Cairo branch, and his bosses were all Goblins. We use post owls to deliver the mail, and — and Harry has a snake with the Sight."

She turned abruptly back to Harry. "You have a *what?*"

"Well", he began, "actually, all snakes have the Sight. A given snake can cover more or less time and space depending on size. But most people don't know that because they're not Parselmouths..."

"They're not *what*?"

He unbuttoned his shirt slightly and removed Sandy. "People who can speak and understand snake-language." He held up Sandy for Maggie to see. "Say hello to a fellow Seer, Sandy", he hissed at her. He smiled, watching Maggie's reaction.

"Hello, fellow Seer", Sandy hissed obligingly.

"She says hello", Harry informed them all.

"And — and we're just supposed to believe that all of that hissing —"

"Trust me", Katie cut in. "She's the genuine article. She told Harry when my dad was going to walk in on us." Then, as soon as she said this, she blushed deeply. Malfoy raised an eyebrow and looked meaningfully at Harry, who frowned at him. He turned to Ron, whose jaw had dropped.

"Well then", Maggie said, sitting back with her arms crossed. Over the hours they'd spent with her she'd become increasingly comfortable with the whole idea of the magical world. "Let's see it, then."

Harry was confused. "What?"

"This Animagus thing. Come on. How am I supposed to believe it if I don't see —"

Harry's paws touched down gently on the Persian carpet. Maggie's voice rose on a scream at the sight of the tawny, green-eyed lion now standing before her. He slowly unfolded his wings, backing up slightly to avoid knocking over some knick-knacks to which the Doughertys had probably become rather attached over the years.

"He's — he's —" she stuttered, when Harry abruptly changed back and calmly sat down. She needed to gulp some more water. "Can all witches and wizards do that?"

"Well, most people can't do the Animagus Transfiguration", Katie explained. "For one thing, that's a wandless spell. But there are temporary Transfiguration spells you can do with a wand, once you're very advanced."

Ron snorted. "Remember how Krum botched that spell during the second task of the tournament?" he said to Harry.

Maggie frowned. "What?"

"There was a wizarding contest called the Triwizard Tournament. I was a champion in the Tournament. One of the other champions half-transfigured himself into a shark to go into the lake at school —" Harry swallowed, seeing Krum in his mind's eye again, Cho kneeling over his body, distraught...

"It's not quite as bad as splinching yourself while Apparating", Katie explained, "but it's really not a good idea to transfigure yourself only half-way into an animal. It can be hard to put right again."

Which meant that then they needed to explain Apparating and splinching, accompanied by demonstrations from Katie and Draco Malfoy, who moved themselves across the room and back several times.

Then Maggie asked again about Ron's aura, still not having received an answer. He hemmed and hawed, but finally he just blurted out:

"I'm a werewolf."

She stared.

"A werewolf."

Ron nodded.

"Full moon, howling, changing into a furry beast *werewolf*."

She looked round at them all; Harry tried to keep his face as composed as possible. He noticed that the others did, too.

"I suppose it's too much to ask that you're all going to start laughing and pointing at me in a minute, that I could be so gullible as to believe my brother is a werewolf?" she said hopefully. They looked at each other. She swallowed. "Um — does this run in our family too?" she asked nervously.

"Oh, no", Ginny assured her. "It's just Ron. He was bitten recently."

Ron looked down, unwilling to meet his older sister's eyes. She put her hand on his chin and forced him to anyway. "Are you all right?" she asked with genuine concern.

He nodded. "I could have been killed. Loads of us could have been, actually. But Harry changed into his griffin form and chased the other wolf through the forest. We were in the Forbidden Forest, at school."

She furrowed her brow. "I remember now that Bill told me he was in there once... he spoke to — to —" She looked up, her eyes wide. "A *centaur*?"

"Right", Harry said. "There are a number of centaurs in the forest. They don't tend to mix with humans much. And there are unicorns, too. And possibly still a Lethifold, although hopefully the cold weather this

winter will kill it. They're tropical, normally." He looked toward Ginny, and saw that she went deep red at the mention of the Lethifold.

"I don't think I even want to *know* what a Lethifold is... So — my little brother is a werewolf. It's a good thing there's no full moon tonight, isn't it?"

"Oh, well, I also take Wolfsbane Potion during the week before the full moon. Our Potions Master from school makes it for me and for Professor Lupin. I mean, Remus. He's not actually our professor any more."

"So he's a werewolf also?"

"Well", Ron hesitated. "He's actually the one who bit me."

"*What?*"

"It's a long story..." which Ron proceeded to tell in part, leaving out large bits that his newly-found sister would probably have found confusing.

They continued to talk and talk; the sky outside darkened and crickets were heard in the summer garden, through the open windows. Finally, Ginny yawned hugely, followed by Ron and Harry.

"We'd better turn in for the night", Harry said, rising. "We can all come again in the morning..."

"Oh, no!" Ginny cried, throwing her arms around her sister. "I don't want to go yet!"

Maggie hugged her back. "Why don't you stay the night, then? I have a big bed; we two sisters can share and sit up all night chatting", she smiled at Ginny, and Harry remembered how Ginny had wished for just that thing in his other life, where her sister had been married.

"Well", Ron said slowly. "But — is there enough room for us all?"

"Hmm... my parents' room is actually in quite a state of disarray right now. I've been painting it while they're on holiday, as a surprise for when they get home. I was going to work on it some more today, but obviously you all gave me something far more interesting to do." She smiled at them. "The furniture is all moved about, the mattress is leaning against the upstairs hall, and there are drop cloths everywhere. And we don't have a guest room; the spare bedroom is my office. There are two couches down here though."

"Except that there are four of us", Ron pointed out. Then he looked up at Katie. "Couldn't you do something, Katie? The way you did at the pub?"

"Well", Harry said, "I don't have to stay the night. I can go back to the pub. Why don't you and Ginny stay, Ron, and Katie and Draco and I will come back in the morning."

"If Ginny is staying, *I'm* staying", Draco Malfoy drawled. "Sleeping on one couch is much the same as another."

Ron growled at him, "Ginny's sleeping in the same room with our *sister*, Malfoy —"

To forestall another fight, Katie said, "Well, that's both couches claimed, then. And Harry will need someone to drive him back to the pub, so I suppose that's what we'll do." She seemed rather anxious, suddenly, to leave.

Maggie wouldn't let Harry go without hugging him soundly and kissing him on the cheek. "Come early — for breakfast. You don't want to eat that pub food, trust me. Worst food in Leicestershire."

He laughed. "All right. We will."

He and Katie drove back to the pub and walked up to their room. When they were alone in the room, Harry suddenly felt a little awkward.

"Er", he said, "why don't you change first?" he asked pointedly, so she'd go into the small shower room to undress. She nodded in a businesslike way and took a small bundle of clothes in with her. Harry quickly stripped down to his drawers and climbed into the bed he'd shared with Ron the previous night, rolling over and feigning sleep.

When Katie emerged from the bathroom, she was wearing a night dress similar to the one from the night before, not very long, with thin straps, but turquoise blue this time. Harry squinted through his eyelashes at her, then quickly squeezed his eyes shut when she began to turn around.

"Harry?"

He debated whether to pretend to snore.

"Harry, you faker. I just wanted to say good night." He felt her draw nearer, and when he opened his eyes she was right above him, leaning over, brushing her lips against his briefly before drawing back and going to her own bed. He swallowed, following the way the fabric of the night dress moved over her body.

"G'night", he choked out as she extinguished the light.

* * *

There was a familiar warmth pressed against him, from chest to knees. He had his arm around the warmth; his left hand was pressed against soft,

slightly slippery material covering firm, warm flesh that was rising and falling in a slow, steady rhythm. Opening his eyes, he saw a tangle of glossy brown hair and a bare shoulder with a thin turquoise strap on it. *When did Katie get into bed with me?*

He wasn't certain how long he had stared at that shoulder when suddenly he yielded to the impulse to press his lips against the smooth tanned skin there, licking and nipping it. He felt her tense, then she leaned back into his body with a slight shudder, and a soft sigh escaped her. After he had been paying attention to her shoulder for some time, she couldn't take being passive any longer, his lips and tongue on her skin making her breathing ragged. She rolled over in his arms and on top of him, like a horizontal *pas de deux*, her mouth on his, her body pressing him down urgently, and he wrapped his arms around her, welcoming her, welcoming this unexpected heat and light. They moved as if they'd already discussed this, as though they had an understanding. He didn't remember the details of how their clothes came to be removed, and thought that perhaps she had done it with magic. He rolled her onto her back, admiring her and seeing that she needed to be admired, demonstrating his admiration with hands and mouth, caress and kiss, experimenting with her, finding out what activities made her produce the most *interesting* noises...

Then they were finally joined and she was holding him to her for dear life, and she spoke at last: "*It's been so long...*" escaped softly from her lips, unbidden, as he strove to fill the emptiness in them both. It hadn't been as long for him, because of Hermione, but in a way it had been forever, because it seemed forever ago that he was in the Quidditch changing rooms with Ginny...

When they were lying together afterward, sated and sweaty, he felt more peaceful than he had in a long time, running one gentle hand up and down her thigh repeatedly, knowing exactly where they stood, no illusions between them. They seemed to have a mutual understanding about why they'd just done what they'd done and no one was hurt or had the upper hand or was using it for a weapon or instrument of emotional blackmail. Each of them knew the other was thinking, at least a little, about someone else, and that was all right. Once they've moved beyond the first partner, Harry thought, are two people ever *really* alone in bed? There would always be ghosts, and sometimes, he imagined, poltergeists. Then that

made him think of Peeves and he had to laugh. Katie smiled at him; this had quickly become one of his favorite sights.

"What are you laughing about?" she asked him quietly, running a finger down his chest. She was resting on her back and he reclined beside her, his head on his right arm.

"I was thinking of Peeves."

Now she laughed too. "Oh, that's what every woman wants to hear after a man's made love to her!"

He laughed again. "It's just that — I was thinking that most people probably have ghosts alongside them when they're in bed. Most people probably have more than us. Then ghosts made me think of poltergeists..."

She smiled and put a finger on his lips to stop him. "I get it." She rolled onto her side and faced him, nose to nose. "Our pasts make us who we are. We're the sum of our history. And while there are some things everyone might want to change about their pasts —"

"Not me", Harry said quickly, thinking of the nightmarish world he had created by changing the past. He missed his mother and Jamie, and even his brothers, but he knew it was all for the best. There were obstacles and challenges in this life, but at least it had unfolded naturally and without interference from people traveling through time, thinking they knew best — much. (He would never regret using the Time Turner to save Sirius.)

"You wouldn't change anything?"

Then he thought of Cedric, and Dudley. It was harder to say this time, but he still did it. "*Not a thing.*" Having saved his mother, he knew now that a single person's death can change the world. And so could undoing that death. "Not a thing", he said again. "Even when I said stupid things or was embarrassed — it's uncomfortable at the time, but it's all worked out in the end. And you learn. You don't say those stupid things again, or you learn how to handle yourself better in certain kinds of situations. It's all a learning process. We aren't getting marked on how we performed in the past, but right now, and in five minutes, and the five minutes after that. That's what counts. The past is the past and what's done is done."

She grimaced. "Sometimes I forget you're younger than me, Harry. You seem to have learned so much more in your lifetime than most people your age."

Well, he thought ruefully, *I lived from fifteen months to the age of sixteen twice, so I'm actually over thirty when you think about it...* But he

couldn't say that. Was that why he was feeling so old these days? he wondered. He had the memories of two lifetimes in his head, and partly, in his Pensieve. He had twice as many experiences to learn from as most people his age. That had to be having *some* effect upon him...

"I lived in a cupboard under a stair for ten years", he said, trying not to seem like he was fishing for sympathy. "I had a lot of time to imagine things, to imagine another life, so I did." It wasn't completely a lie. He *had* imagined many times what life might have been like if his parents had lived, all those years in his cupboard. But that wasn't what he described to her now. "I imagined a life with my mum and dad, and a sister and younger twin brothers, and we all lived in a big house and went to the seaside in the summer and to parks and circuses..." he said, picturing his family from his other life running down the beach and splashing into the water. He remembered all of them going to a wizarding circus when he was six, getting sick on too many sweets, and his mum tucking him into bed later with a hot towel on his head, singing to him and checking to make sure he hadn't had too terrible a time, and telling her *No, it was the best day of my life...*

She continued to smile at him. "You're rather amazing, do you know that, Harry Potter?"

He gazed into her eyes for half a minute, seeing himself reflected there, and then he closed the very small distance between their mouths and kissed her softly, slowly falling onto his back again and pulling her with him. He'd forgotten about that amazing sensation of another unclothed body pressed full-length against his...

Then he broke their kiss and looked up at her, tucking her hair behind her ears gently so it didn't fall into her face. "You're pretty amazing yourself, Katie Bell." She didn't answer him with words but kissed him again, then moved her mouth down to his neck, and down his chest...

Afterward, they rolled back into their spooning position again, the position that had started it all, and Harry pulled the sheet up over both of them as Katie pressed her head more firmly into the pillow, making small contented noises as he wrapped his arm around her waist again, this time with his hand pressed against her smooth belly instead of the fabric of her night dress. He closed his eyes as he breathed in the scent of her hair and skin, giving a mental prayer of thanks for whatever twist of fate had given him this temporary respite from chaos and uncertainty.

* * *

"There was only one key."

"Well, why didn't they leave it with us?"

"Because they needed it to get back into the room."

"Why didn't one of you or Katie make a copy of it? You're all of age. It's not like Harry or I could do it."

"Oh, right, it's all very well to point fingers now, but I didn't hear you making that suggestion yesterday before they came back here."

"Lay off her, Weasley. You didn't think of it either. None of us did. Including Potter, your *hero*."

"If I recall, Malfoy, he saved *your* sorry arse in the forest when you were stupid enough to go by yourself. Or have you forgotten that you owe your life to him?"

"Stop it, the pair of you! Of course Draco is grateful to Harry for saving his life." Stark silence. "Leave him alone!" she added with an awkward shake in her voice.

Ron sighed noisily. "Come *on*. Maggie's waiting in the car. We said we'd get some clean clothes and wake up Harry and Katie and be out quickly. She'll think we've been swallowed up by a great hole."

"*Black* hole", Ginny corrected him. "You never did do very well in Astronomy, did you?"

"All right, bloody *black* hole. Are you happy?"

Katie turned over and grinned up at Harry, who had been sitting up in bed, listening to the conversation taking place in the corridor outside their room. "They woke us up all right", she whispered to him. "We'd better get moving before one of them decides to —"

"*Alohomora!*"

The door swung open just as Katie very wisely pulled the sheet further up, so she was fully covered. Draco Malfoy stood in the doorway with his wand out; he quickly sheathed it under his shirt sleeve (Harry realized suddenly that the holster would be right over his Dark Mark) and he strode into the room and over to his bag, which was still sitting on the couch.

He didn't look at them as he pawed through his clothes, selecting something to wear. "Morning, Potter. Morning, Bell. Had a good shag?" he said casually while he closed his bag again.

Ginny and Ron still stood in the doorway. Ron's mouth was hanging open stupidly and Ginny...

Harry wanted to crawl under a rock, or into Ron's "great hole." He wanted to be anywhere other than where he was, with Ginny looking at him as though he'd killed her. *She thinks I'm no better than Draco Malfoy, I'll bet.* And suddenly, he didn't feel particularly morally superior to her morally-bankrupt boyfriend. He felt dreadful. He remembered the letter Ginny had written after the first Daisy Furuncle story had appeared. She thought he and Katie were just friends...

Friends who'd just spent the hour before dawn shagging.

Twice.

"Could the three of you get what you've come for and go? I'd like to go take a shower", Katie said, with, Harry thought, a hint of laughter in her voice. *She thinks this is funny*, he realized.

Malfoy stood at the foot of their bed holding his clean clothes and smirking. "Don't let me stop you." Harry assumed he was waiting to get another eyeful, as when Hermione had inadvertently sat up without the sheet covering her in the Leaky Cauldron.

Ginny's face was closed up. She wouldn't look at Harry and Katie. In stark contrast to the nasty looks she'd been giving to Katie the day before, now she went to her own bag and removed some clothes with a blank, almost vacant expression on her face, as though her emotions had shut down entirely and she had no ability to move her face to show her feelings. She seemed to be trying very hard not to *have* feelings.

Ginny rushed out into the corridor as soon as she had what she wanted. Harry thought Draco and Ron seemed to be dawdling a little. "Clear off!" he said testily. "We'll get dressed and meet you over at Maggie's house."

Draco finally left after looking suggestively at Katie's sheet-shrouded form. Ron lingered in the doorway. "Making a habit of this, aren't you?" he said with a raised eyebrow before closing the door. Harry threw himself back on the bed and put the pillow over his head, groaning.

"What did he mean by *that*?" Katie wanted to know, prying the pillow off his face.

Harry looked up at the cracked plaster on the ceiling and explained to her what had happened near the end of his fifth year when Ginny, Draco and Ron had entered his room at the Leaky Cauldron and found him and Hermione in bed together.

Katie threw herself back onto the bed next to Harry, laughing hysterically. "You're kidding! The *same three people* found you in a room

in a pub with a naked girl before?"

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head. "I'm *not* kidding."

Still laughing, Katie rolled over and pressed her chest against his, her face very close to his. "You think they're still right outside the door? Want to give them something to listen to?" She smiled impishly.

He sat up reluctantly, trying not to look at her body and failing. "No! I do *not* want to give them something to listen to —"

She laughed again and threw back the sheet, finally getting out of bed. "Aw, you're no fun." He gave up on not looking at her compact little body.

"I thought you thought I was quite a lot of fun only a little while ago..."

She gave him a wicked grin and disappeared into the bathroom. He looked up at the ceiling again, remembering Ginny's closed-up face, trying to force himself not to care about this. But at the same time —

He knew that wasn't going to happen.

* * *

They drove over to Highgrove Street after showering and dressing. When they arrived, they heard voices in the garden, so they walked on the path leading round the house and found Ron and his sisters and Draco Malfoy on the terrace, eating breakfast. Maggie sprang to her feet when she saw them.

"Oh, there you are! Sorry we didn't wait, but there's still plenty. Eggs, anyone? Fried tomatoes? And these are some lovely sausages I picked up a couple of days ago..."

They sat at the round table with the others, not meeting anyone's gaze. Maggie seemed quite chipper, he thought. Perhaps they hadn't told her. But then she looked slyly at the two of them, her blue eyes twinkling.

"I understand the two of you have worked up quite an appetite..."

Harry felt his face grow warm. Next to him, Katie was trying not to laugh; under the table, she banged his knee with hers on purpose, he was sure. She was *much* bolder than Hermione, he realized (which explained how it was they'd already slept together). Of course she was older, and she'd been in a serious relationship before. He remembered her laughing when he told her about the Leaky Cauldron debacle. He felt a smile pull at the corner of his mouth now; in retrospect, it *had* been funny. Oh, Hermione had been mortified. And Malfoy had given her plenty of grief

about it for some time. (As if he hadn't already been overusing the rack-of-lamb jokes.) But with time and distance...

"Butter wouldn't melt in your mouth, Potter", Draco drawled as he helped himself to more orange juice. He looked at Katie with one eyebrow raised. He saw that Katie looked boldly back with a bit of a scowl. She was *not* going to be stared down by Draco Malfoy. Harry realized that the Slytherin had no idea that he was trying to get the better of an Auror-in-training. *Keep it up, Malfoy, he thought. See what kind of hex that gets you.*

"What are we going to do today?" Maggie asked with anticipation after they'd cleared up the breakfast things. Katie, Draco and Ron had entertained her in the kitchen by making the breakfast dishes fly around and wash themselves up. Draco had less practice at this than the others and had to repair several glasses, but Maggie was just as impressed by this.

"Could *I* do that?" she asked in awe, watching the pieces of the glass fly back together.

"Well —" Harry said reluctantly, thinking of his aunt. "You haven't been properly trained. And there are laws about not letting Muggles see you do things..."

She nodded. "That makes sense. After about the age of ten I learned to control myself a bit better. I really didn't like the funny looks and complicated questions after some of the things I did when I was first adopted. I didn't want any more of that than absolutely necessary."

"But you could be trained up", Ginny told her, putting some food in the fridge. "And we *have* to get Mum and Dad here to see you! Ron's waiting for his owl, Pigwidgeon to come back. He wrote to them. Hopefully —"

As if on cue, the small excited owl began banging himself against the window over the sink. "Pig!" Ron cried, running through the conservatory and onto the terrace, returning with the small bird, wings fluttering as madly as if it was a grey, fuzzy Snitch.

"Oh!" Maggie exclaimed. "Isn't it the most darling thing?" Ron showed Pigwidgeon to her as Ginny extricated the letter from his tiny foot. She unrolled the parchment and read it, grinning, then looked up at her sister.

"They should be here at about eleven!"

"*Eleven?* How will they get here so fast?"

Ginny shrugged. "They can Apparate. It's almost instantaneous. You saw Draco and Katie do it."

"Yes, but — that was just across the room and back. They can Apparate to Appleby Magna from — from —"

"The Burrow. It's outside Ottery St. Catchpole."

Maggie sat at her kitchen table, shaking her head. "It's all just —"

Suddenly, with two abrupt *pops*! Arthur and Molly Weasley appeared in the conservatory, each with their feet stuck in a potted palm. Ginny stared through the French doors leading into the conservatory from the kitchen.

"Mum! Dad! You're early! And you're, um — is that the same as being splinched?"

Molly Weasley looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Not precisely dear, but it is somewhat *scratchy*. Just a moment —"

She suddenly disappeared and then reappeared on the tiled floor next to the palm. She had what appeared to be a great deal of dirt in her shoes, which she removed, dumping the dirt into the pot. While she did this, her husband also Disapparated from the pot in which he'd originally landed, reappearing on the floor. He smiled round at them all.

"Well! Here we are! Now — Ron. Why did you want us to come to —?"

He stopped abruptly when he saw Maggie, who slowly stood, staring at her father with tears in her eyes for the first time in seventeen years.

"*Daddy?*" she said in a very small voice, suddenly sounding rather like a seven-year-old. They both moved to close the distance between them and Harry's nose started to itch and his eyes to sting as they held each other and rocked back and forth. Molly Weasley was standing where she had landed, staring with disbelief at her husband and long-lost daughter.

"Is it —?" she whispered, looking almost frightened.

Her father looked at her. "Annie?" he whispered with tears in his voice. "Or is it Peggy?"

Maggie turned from her father, who was crying openly for the first time since Harry had known him. "*Mummy*," she murmured, leaning down to hug her diminutive mother tenderly. She straightened up again and looked down at her lovingly. "Actually, it's Maggie. I've gone by Maggie for quite a long time now."

Her mother nodded, tearing up and taking out a handkerchief to manage. "That's one thing I considered", she choked out. "You — you were

named after my sister, Meg. I suppose I thought it was a little close to that. When she was small we called her Meggie..."

Maggie smiled through her tears. "My friends call me Mags sometimes, if that helps. But my parents never liked it." She put her hand over her mouth in horror. "I mean —"

Molly Weasley put her hand over her daughter's. "Don't worry about that dear. I'm very grateful to them for bringing you up so well." She beamed up at her daughter, tears still in her eyes, and Ginny and Ron came to stand on either side of her, looking at their parents.

"Surprise!" Ron said, grinning.

"Oh, you —" his mother began. "You couldn't have *said* —"

"You didn't even know that I *knew*", Ron said, not sounding the least bit put-out now that his parents hadn't been the ones to tell him about his sisters. "If I'd said anything, you'd have wondered how I knew —"

"Yes, yes. Well!" his father said. "I'm rather curious to know how you tracked her down."

"The short story is that Harry and Draco and Hermione did it", said Ginny. "We can get to the long story —"

Suddenly, Molly had thrown herself on Harry and then Draco in quick succession, while Arthur was shaking hands and slapping their backs. Draco went quite pink, and Harry also felt his face grow warm again. "Where's Hermione?" Molly asked suddenly, looking around with confusion.

Ron's ears went unexpectedly red. "She couldn't come", he said suddenly. "Other obligations." Harry frowned. Was Hermione being completely truthful to him about why she couldn't come along? Ron seemed to know something he didn't. On the other hand — she and Ron were possibly on their way to being a couple. If they wanted to have some secrets, he shouldn't begrudge them. He and Hermione had certainly had their share of secrets from Ron when they were seeing each other.

They moved into the living room and spent the day going over how they'd found Maggie and how she'd recovered her memories. When Arthur Weasley heard about the *Tempus fugit* spell, however, his reaction made Katie's seem mild.

"*Harry!*" he cried angrily — the first time Harry ever remembered Ron's and Ginny's father ever directing his ire at him. He was always

unfailingly kind toward Harry. "How could you do that? I never thought you, of all people, would do Dark Magic —"

"Will people stop saying that?" Ginny suddenly demanded. Everyone was silent, staring at her. "Harry jolted her memory back. And he had a theory about how she was kidnapped that seems to be spot-on. *And* if he hadn't come up with her name, we never would have found Maggie to begin with. He *said* it was Voldemort who put that spell on him back in September. That's how he knew it. He would never use it for doing anything bad. This is *Harry*." She paused, catching her breath. Harry met her eyes across the room, quite shocked. He had thought that she hated him. She wouldn't look at him back at the pub, after finding him in bed with Katie. She had rejected him, even after he'd saved her from the Lethifold and she'd temporarily given in to temptation and kissed him passionately. She'd also kissed him back when he'd fixed the timelines and was relieved to find her alive. Now he didn't know what to think. Suddenly, it was as though they were the only two people in the room.

"Er — yeah." Draco's feeble agreement with his girlfriend sounded strange and awkward. "I mean — I know Dark Magic. My dad — well, let's just say I've seen things I probably shouldn't have. I won't go into detail. That's at least got to be the best motive for using Dark Magic I've ever seen. Using it to set right something else that was done by Dark Magic, I mean. You're not seriously going to jump on him because he helped your daughter get her memory back, are you?"

Harry had to admit — he was impressed. Not only was Draco Malfoy standing up to his girlfriend's father, whom he was always worried about displeasing, he was defending Harry at the same time. Harry almost felt like pinching himself to see whether he was awake, but suddenly Molly came and sat next to him and put her arm around his shoulder, hugging him to her.

"Leave him alone, Arthur. He had good intentions, didn't you, Harry?"

Harry winced at the phrase, remembering the *Tempus bonae voluntatis* spell. "Er — yeah. I — I just wanted to —"

"Bill and Charlie!" Molly exclaimed suddenly, springing to her feet.

"What?" Ron asked, perplexed.

"We need to tell them! Oh, they'll be so overcome..."

Maggie frowned. "I wish I hadn't started that painting project. I've no good way to put up more than a few visitors, and at the pub —"

"Oh!" Harry said suddenly, to stop her revealing that the five of them had shared the same room for one night, and just him and Katie the other. "Er, I mean — today's the thirtieth, isn't it? We were supposed to be traveling today, if we're to get up to Ascog by tomorrow!"

"Ascog?" Maggie asked, perplexed. Harry and Ron took turns explaining to her that the next day was Harry's birthday, and his godfather was planning a big party at Ascog Castle for him.

"Oh, drat!" Maggie said disappointedly. "I don't want to say goodbye to my brother and sister yet! But — I don't want to make you miss a party —"

"You can all come!" Harry said suddenly. He hesitated for a moment — Ascog was *going* to be his home, but it wasn't yet. Did he have a right to invite additional people? "I mean — I'm sure Sirius wouldn't mind. You're Ginny's and Ron's sister", he nodded at Maggie, "and you're their parents", he added, nodded at the Weasleys. "He's not going to turn you away. And then you can use one of the fireplaces at the castle to call Bill and Charlie, and the twins and Percy —"

As they joked and laughed and make plans to go to Ascog Castle, Harry looked at Ginny again and she looked back at him. She was sitting next to Draco, who put a protective arm around her and nodded at Harry. He nodded back. They'd both defended him. What was he to make of that? Ginny's behavior on this trip had been a complete mystery to him so far. He decided that he needed to talk to her when they reached Scotland. If not sooner.

* * *

It was decided that Maggie would drive her parents and Ron in her car, while Ginny stayed with Draco and Katie and Harry in the Bells' car. Since Katie and Harry had already worked out the route before leaving Surrey, Maggie would be following behind them.

This time, Draco Malfoy had no argument with sitting in the back seat when he wasn't driving; he wasn't about to have Harry sitting back there with his girlfriend. Harry stared out at the road, trying to ignore the sounds from the back seat. Draco and Ginny were whispering to each other.

"Draco! Watch your hands. We're not really alone here..."

"All right, all right... I suppose we shouldn't be like them..."

Harry wanted to turn around and demand, *Now what's that supposed to mean?* but then he'd have to admit to eavesdropping, something Draco

Malfoy thought he was far too good at already. They had left at about two o'clock, after eating lunch, turning onto Measham Road from Stoney Lane and getting on the M42 just a few minutes later. A mere fifteen minutes later they were on the M6, where they had to remain, unfortunately, for two-hundred miles. More than three hours later, Katie finally pulled over, groaning, before getting on the A74. She'd been driving twice as long as either she or Draco had done on the way to Leicestershire, and when she'd brought the car to a full stop, she started moving her head in circles on her neck and flexing her arms.

Harry reached out and put his hands on her shoulders, clucking at her. "I'm surprised you made it *this* long", he said, starting to knead her knotted muscles.

"When I've been driving for three hours, will I get a massage from you, too?" Draco drawled from the back seat.

"If you like", Harry told him, batting his eyelashes. Katie started whooping with laughter, Harry joining her, and then he saw that neither Ginny nor Draco was joining in. Harry looked at Ginny again, but she wasn't looking at him; she was once more glaring at Katie.

They switched so that Draco was in the driver's seat and Ginny next to him, with Katie and Harry in the back seat. They pulled onto the road again, Maggie's car following them once more. Harry wondered how she was holding up, since she didn't have someone to share the driving, as neither her parents nor Ron had licenses. He did a double take when he saw Arthur Weasley behind the wheel of his daughter's car. *He didn't have a license — did he?* Then Harry remembered the Ford Anglia. Well, he'd driven in that to London to take them to the school train... He just hoped no one stopped them and asked to see his license.

It was already five-thirty. Harry was starting to feel hungry for his tea. But Katie was broadly hinting that he could continue to massage her neck and shoulders, so he did that instead, to take his mind off his empty stomach. At one point he met Ginny's eyes in the rear-view mirror. He couldn't tear his eyes away; he continued to knead Katie's shoulders, looking into Ginny's eyes... until suddenly, Katie yelled, "Ow!"

"Oh — I'm sorry. What's the matter?"

"It's just — I think that spot's done already. You're starting to make me more sore than I was before you started."

"Sorry —"

Suddenly Draco Malfoy guffawed from the driver's seat. "Oh, I'm glad you think my pain is so *funny*," Katie said archly.

"It's not that. I was just imagining you saying that to Potter when you were in bed —"

"Sod off!" Harry told him automatically; then he was chagrined to see that Katie was laughing, too. She looked at him merrily.

"Sorry", she whispered. Then she leaned very close to his ear and said quietly, "I would never say that to you in bed. And you *do* have excellent hands, you know..."

Her breath was warm in his ear, and he met Ginny's eyes in the mirror again, making him flush guiltily. Katie relaxed now, reclining in the back seat and putting her head on Harry's thigh. Harry had moved so that he was sitting behind Ginny, instead of Draco, so he could not longer see her eyes in the mirror.

An hour after they'd switched to the A74 they had to change to the M74. Sandy hissed to Harry, and he groaned. *Great*, he thought. *I have to spend even more time in this bleeding car...*

"Traffic jam up ahead", he informed the others dully.

"How the hell do you know?" Draco Malfoy demanded.

"Sandy."

That was all he had to say. And sure enough, soon after they'd changed to the M74, everything came to a grinding halt. Instead of staying on this road for about half-an-hour, it was more like twice that long. Katie was sleeping peacefully on Harry's leg, and Draco Malfoy was drumming impatiently on the steering wheel of the car.

"Damn! If only I could just jump the car ahead of this mess..."

"Well, you can't. Muggles would see. What's wrong anyway?" Harry asked him. Sandy hadn't been forthcoming about the cause of the traffic problem.

"Dunno. Maybe an accident. I can't see a damn thing. And I haven't a bloody snake with the Sight."

"Show some respect. A snake is the emblem of your house, after all. She doesn't insult *you*."

"*Although I could, quite thoroughly*" Sandy responded silkily from under Harry's sleeve. He started laughing at that, and Draco Malfoy turned around to glare at him, clearly fighting the urge to ask what Sandy had said to Harry.

Harry checked out the back window to make sure Maggie and Ron and the Weasleys were still behind them; they seemed to be taking the traffic situation in stride, talking animatedly to each other and gesturing, laughing...

He turned around, sighing. He'd *never* get to his new home at this rate...

Finally, they were able to switch to the M73, and then, soon after, the M8. They pulled onto the High Street in Skelmorlie just after seven o'clock, to switch drivers again. There was just one more leg of the trip, to Wemyss Bay, where they would get the ferry to the Isle of Bute.

When they reached the quay in Wemyss, it was seven-forty, and the bar was lowered, so that no more cars could drive onto the ferry. Katie pounded the steering wheel angrily. "Damn! That's the last ferry! We'll have to wait until tomorrow morning now!"

Harry couldn't believe it. "No we won't", he said briefly, getting out of the car and striding to Maggie's car behind them. He rapped on Arthur Weasley's window, and he rolled it down, looking concerned.

"What is it, Harry?" he smiled at him.

"We're about to miss the last ferry of the day unless you *do* something", he told him urgently. He nodded briskly, then discreetly pulled out his wand. Harry returned to Katie's car and a minute later, the barrier rose and both cars were permitted to pull onto the ferry. They paid their passage and after the cars were taken care of, the eight of them went up on deck, to look at the scenery and breathe the sea air. Harry gave Mr. Weasley a conspiratorial smile.

"Thanks. I'm sorry I did that, but — well, I'm not really. I just couldn't wait one more day to —"

"That's all right, Harry", he said, clapping him on the shoulder. "I understand completely. Glad to help."

It only took about half-an-hour to reach the port of Rothesay, and soon they were trundling the cars off the ferry and onto dry land again. Harry took out the directions Sirius had sent him to the castle and showed Maggie.

"Oh! *That's* where we're going?"

"Right. My godfather —"

"But — but it's a ruin! I have this book: *Picturesque Ruined Castles of Scotland*. And no one could possibly live there. It's just a pile of rubble. It

used to be a fortified tower house. It was sacked sometime in the mid-seventeenth century, and then —"

"— and then they killed the survivors in Dunoon", he finished, knowing the story full well, since it was Lucius Malfoy's favorite 'bloody' clan story. Literally.

"Right. So how could your godfather possibly —"

He grinned mischievously at the woman who, forty-eight hours earlier hadn't known that anyone in the world other than her had the sort of abilities she had.

"One word", he said, continuing to smile. "*Magic*."

* * *

There was a bit of confusion when they were getting back into the cars to drive off the ferry, and Harry wound up in Maggie's car while Mrs. Weasley found it most convenient to just climb into Katie's. After they were back on land, they drove along Battery Place before turning onto the High Street. It was a short drive down to Minister's Brae, and soon they were on Roslin Road, which went right down to the northeast edge of the loch. Harry hadn't expected that; the castle was right on the edge of the loch. It looked beautiful and still in the twilight, standing straight and tall, five stories plus what looked like a roof garden. It didn't have a large footprint; it looked like the only way to expand was to build up, so that's what they'd done, as though they were in a city without a lot of empty land around to annex. It seemed strange for this tall, lonely stone building to be sitting by itself at the edge of the still water, nothing but wilderness around it in all directions, except for the road that briefly passed the edge of the loch.

They drove along a dirt track near the shore, Maggie shaking her head more and more as they drew closer to Ascog Castle. "See!" she said triumphantly, when they were about twenty feet away from it. "Nothing but a moldering ruin! Just like in the book!"

Ron turned and looked at Harry in panic, then his father, then Maggie. "But — but *I* can see it. Can't you see it Harry?" Harry nodded, confused. "Can't you, Dad? I thought you said you knew you were a witch!" he said to his sister. Then he turned to Harry. "Come to think of it — we didn't actually see her perform magic, did we?"

His father turned to him. "Even witches and wizards can fall prey to the same blindness that afflicts Muggles if their minds are closed, if they

decide what they are going to see before they see it." He put a gentle hand on Maggie's arm. "Are you sure you're really seeing it, love? Or is your mind clouded by what you were told, what you read? Look again, and *believe*."

Harry shuddered, remembering Rodney Jeffries.

Looking up, he saw Sirius wave to them out of one of the upper windows. "Look at the fourth floor window on the left!" he told her. "It's my godfather. He's waving to us."

She frowned still. "There's no fourth fl —"

Suddenly Sirius appeared in front of the car, Apparating with a *pop*! He was grinning ear to ear. Maggie gasped, unprepared for this. Then she looked up at the house again.

"I — I can see it now! It's — it's —" She couldn't speak. It must seem to her like the building Apparated out of nowhere as well, Harry thought.

Sirius strode over to the car and leaned in Arthur Weasley's window, oblivious to the driver's confusion. "Hullo! Looks like you forgot to tell me about a few more guests, Harry. But it doesn't matter. We can make room for everyone. Follow me." He directed both cars to a small rundown cottage that was about thirty yards away through some overgrown brush, away from the lake, and the entire side of the cottage magically opened like an electronic garage door, allowing them to drive both cars inside. The cottage closed again and lights sprung up around them. As they emerged from the cars, Sirius hugged Harry and Ron and Ginny and even Draco Malfoy, who was somewhat abashed. He was introduced to Katie, raising his eyebrows at Harry, and he was reacquainted with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

Then he saw Maggie. He looked back and forth between her and Ginny, confused. "But — but —" he stammered to the Weasleys. "You only have one daughter."

"Actually", Molly Weasley said, "we have two other daughters in addition to Ginny, but we didn't know where they were for a very long time." She put her arm around Maggie lovingly. "Now, thanks to Harry and Draco — and Hermione, as well — we have one of them back again."

Sirius looked like his mind was working furiously; then he seemed to have an epiphany. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "I remember now! You — you're one of the little girls who disappeared..."

Maggie was looking at Sirius very strangely. "Well, I'm not really a little girl any more —" she stammered out. Harry frowned; why did she suddenly seem so nervous?

"No; I can see that you're not", Sirius said levelly, gazing at her very gravely. Harry was jolted; he'd never seen Sirius look like this before. It was very odd.

Suddenly, as though he'd just woken up, Sirius clapped his hands. "Well, everyone, follow me! It's not far, but the steps down and up are a little steep, so mind your step."

"Mind the gap!" Maggie sang merrily, pulling her suitcase from the boot of her car. Harry and Sirius laughed, but everyone else just looked at her as though she was mad.

"Er — there are these signs. In the Underground —" She sighed and decided to give up. "Never mind", she said softly, following her parents down the steps to the access tunnel. Sirius walked beside her and gently took her bag from her hand to carry it for her. Walking behind them, Harry heard him say quietly, "I thought it was funny..."

"So you know, then? What I meant?"

He nodded, smiling at her with that look again. She smiled back, then obligingly looked down, so she wouldn't trip down the steep stairs. Sirius put his hand on her elbow and she smiled at him again.

When they reached the castle dungeons, Harry saw Ron looking at the empty, spartan cells they passed, his face apprehensive in the flickering torchlight. Soon they were climbing steep, winding stone stairs again, lit by more torches in brackets on the curving walls, and then they found themselves in the smallish entrance hall to Ascog Castle.

To Harry, it looked more like a shed for storing raincoats and other foul-weather gear than a grand entrance hall. Although the ceiling had to be at least twelve feet high, the space couldn't have been more than ten feet square, and now nine people and their luggage were crushing into this space. The circular stone stairs continued up to the next floor, while the curving walls in the hall where they stood were lined with hooks for outdoor gear of all types. Harry thought it was a good thing it was summer, and none of them needed cloaks, for every hook was being used already for raincoats, umbrellas, overcoats and wizard's cloaks, mufflers, an enormous variety of hats — Harry saw a deer-stalker and top hat, besides the usual wizard hats — as well as rucksacks, walking sticks, several

woven creels, fishing rods lain horizontally across the upper tier of hooks (there were five levels of hooks, the highest about nine feet off the floor, Harry reckoned) and, hanging from a beautifully tooled tanned leather strap, an elaborately-carved animal horn with what looked like a solid gold cap on the end. On the stone walls above the rows of hooks were numerous enormous stuffed and mounted fish. Some of them looked prehistoric.

Through the doorways that opened off the entrance hall, Harry could see a large kitchen with a long refectory table flanked by benches, where two boys and a little girl were sitting, eating biscuits and drinking something steaming out of mugs. On the wall at the far end of the kitchen was a tapestry with a silver rampant lion on deep blue. Through the other, larger doorway there was a cozy sitting room with two squashy couches and some padded benches arranged around a large hearth in the corner. A French door in a curved wall in the corner of the hall led to a courtyard, which the leaded windows in the kitchen and sitting room also looked upon. When Harry opened a door in the corner of the hall, he found a small lavatory, and he closed the door quickly, hoping no one had noticed him being nosy.

However, there was so much chaos and noise in the hall, he didn't feel like anyone was taking much notice of him, and he took the opportunity to look around some more. A narrow bench was pushed against one wall, under which was stored a great quantity of Wellington boots, and the top of the bench had a number of Wellies, too, in addition to some hip boots for fishing. Hanging on a hook above the bench was a basket with a diverse collection of gloves and mittens — none of them matching, as far as Harry could tell from just a quick glance. Some of the cloaks and boots in the entrance hall looked child-sized to Harry, as did some of the small gloves he saw in the basket. He stood in the kitchen doorway and smiled at the children, and this time they noticed him and smiled back. He remembered that Sirius had only recently met his nephews and niece. Harry couldn't remember the names Remus Lupin had told him...

"Orion! Leo! Mercy!" Sirius cried gleefully, striding over to the kitchen doorway and putting his arm around Harry's shoulders. "Come meet your new housemate!"

The children were already in their pajamas and dressing gowns, just having a snack before having to go up to bed. The eldest boy stood and

walked purposefully over to Harry. He had dark hair and eyes, and, he thought, Sirius' smile. He put out his hand and Harry shook it.

"Orion Pierson. What's your —" he started to say, but then Harry could tell that he'd noticed his scar. His mouth dropped open. "You're — you're —"

Harry laughed, turning to Sirius. "You didn't *tell* them?"

Sirius shrugged. "I assumed they knew. I've been saying, 'At the end of July, my godson is coming to live here'. It's been in the *Prophet* recently, for pete's sake. Don't you read the paper, Rion?"

Harry stared at him in disbelief. "You never said *my name*?"

Sirius' eldest nephew shook his head dumbly, then finally recovered himself. "I'm going to Hogwarts in September. Got my letter last month." His voice was still no lower than an alto.

Harry nodded at him. "So — we won't have to say goodbye on September first. I'm Head Boy this year." Then he winced; did he sound like Percy? he wondered. But the boy was shaking his head in wonder and looking dazed again.

"*Harry Potter... living in my house...*"

Now the second nephew had come over. "Hullo! Don't forget about me! Not that everyone else doesn't do that. I'm used to it by now. I'm Leo Pierson. No, it's not short for Leonard or Leonardo or anything. It's just Leo. I don't even qualify for a proper name..."

"*Leo!*" Sirius said sharply, but after a moment, Harry could see that he was smiling behind his eyes. This was clearly Leo's routine; the Lament of the Forgotten Middle Child. Like Orion, he had dark hair and eyes, but his face still had some baby fat that Orion had lost now that he was eleven. He was several inches shorter than his brother and Harry guessed he was around nine years old.

Finally, from behind her brothers, the little sister emerged. She looked up at him with the strangest eyes Harry had ever seen; instead of being dark, like her brothers', they were so pale the irises almost blended into the whites. She had the same dark hair as her brothers, though, and dimples in her heart-shaped face when she smiled. He guessed she was around seven years old.

"Mercedes Pierson", she said simply, extending her hand. Harry shook it solemnly; he'd never seen such a grave little girl. "Are you going to be my new big brother? Or a cousin?"

Harry looked at Sirius, his eyebrows raised. "Harry's neither, Mercy. He's my godson and a member of this household now, and he'll always be an honorary member of the Black family and of Clan Lamont, but no, he's not your brother or cousin."

Her mouth twisted and she looked at Harry appraisingly; he fought not to squirm. It was very odd to be looked at so by such a small child. Even being the big brother in his other life hadn't prepared him for this. "So then; you can't boss us around?" she said, crossing her arms.

"Ah, is that it?" Sirius said, smiling and mussing her hair with his hand. "Don't get any ideas", he said more sternly now. "Harry counts as one of the grownups, and you have to listen to him just as you listen to any of us." Somehow, by the look on Sirius' face, Harry was doubting that she paid much heed to *anyone*. "Your parents have ultimate authority over you, of course, but you'll mind Harry just as you mind your Nana or Granddad or me or Aunt Cass; you don't give any adult reason to speak to your parents about your behavior, understand?"

She looked meek and abashed now as she said quietly, "Yes, Uncle Sirius." Yet Harry thought he saw a twinkle in those odd, pale eyes. Was it an act, this meekness? He knew she'd be one to watch. Or rather, he thought, he should watch his back.

It took some doing, figuring out who was going to sleep where. Sirius gave the guest room to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron and Draco were going to kip on the couches in the sitting room, Sirius gave his room to Maggie and Ginny, so he would be bunking with Harry, and Katie was going to share with Mercy. Except for Ron and Draco, everyone carried their luggage up the winding stairs, groaning with exhaustion. They weren't able to stop on the first floor up from the ground floor, as the bedrooms there belonged to Sirius' eldest sister and her husband (who were childless) and his mother and father.

The infamous Cassiopeia stood in her bedroom doorway, surveying the ragtag collection of visitors that had invaded her home. She was wearing wizarding robes, deep purple ones that shimmered with a hint of sapphire blue. Her hair and eyes were as dark as Sirius', but her look was very sharp and critical, her bearing regal as any Italian Countess. After some very brief and disturbing eye-contact, Harry avoided her gaze as Sirius introduced him on the way past. She nodded, her judgmental expression

never wavering. Harry allowed himself to shiver when he was well away from her.

Sirius' parents, on the other hand, were warm and kind. His father was an amazing repeat of Sirius, but with a shock of perfectly white hair and eyes that crinkled when he smiled — which seemed to be all the time. Harry had trouble retrieving his hand, it seemed Mr. Black wanted to shake it all night, he was so pleased Harry had come.

Mrs. Black made him think of the grandmother he'd always wanted. That was one thing he hadn't had in his other life, either: grandparents. She wasn't much shorter than him, and hadn't shrunken with age. She was a handsome woman with dark hair touched by just a bit of silver, beautiful smile lines that accentuated her high cheekbones, and sparkling blue eyes that reminded Harry of Dumbledore. She hugged him warmly, whispering in his ear, *"Thank you so much for helping our lad come home!"* There were tears in her voice, and Harry could not reply; he smiled bashfully at her before trudging upward.

Katie was able to stop on the second floor, which was where the children had their rooms. When Katie was being led to her room by Mercy, Harry heard Mercy saying to her, *"I read the paper, even if my brothers don't. You said your name's Katie Bell? You're Harry Potter's girlfriend, aren't you?"* Katie looked over her shoulder and mouthed *HELP* at Harry, who grinned at her as he continued up the stairs with his trunk. Clearly, Mercy wasn't going to show any.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were finally able to stop on the third floor, where the guest room was. Sirius' sister Ursula and her husband also had a bedroom on this floor. She immediately started dashing about helping the Weasleys feel at home, and Harry could see what Cass could have been if she'd ever bothered to smile. Ursula had the same dimples she'd given her daughter, the same heart-shaped face. She gave Harry a warm hug, like her mother, and he knew she didn't resent his coming to live in their home. Her husband was very nice as well, and Harry saw now where Mercy had gotten her strange light eyes. He squeezed past them down the stairs, to see that his children were tucked in, even as the travelers continued upward.

Harry's and Sirius' rooms were on the top floor. Sirius retrieved some clothes from his room and then left to give the Weasley sisters some

privacy; when he returned to Harry's room, he had that expression on his face Harry had seen earlier.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked him, his brow furrowed. Sirius looked up, startled.

"What?" He shook himself for a moment, then continued bustling around the room. "Oh. I'm fine. Fine."

Harry looked around the room appreciatively. The whitewashed walls smelled of fresh paint, there was an enormous four-poster hung with blue velvet curtains with a matching blue coverlet, a massive Persian carpet in shades of blue and gold and cream softening the hard stone floor, and across from the bed was a large semi-circular bay window with a blue-velvet-upholstered window seat looking down into the courtyard. Harry also had a massive carved oak wardrobe, a dresser with a mirror and two built-in candle holders, a desk and some bookshelves. In the corner near the bed was a small fireplace; large enough for conversations, too small for transport. Harry had seen, however, that the sitting room fire was big enough to use for getting around on the Floo network. That's good, he thought; someone couldn't just come walking into his bedroom from the fire. On the other hand, someone's head could just pop into the fire and start talking to him... He didn't know for certain that this fireplace was on the network, though. Perhaps he would ask for it to be taken off if it was.

After Sirius showed him his en suite bathroom, they went back down to the kitchen for a late supper. Before going down, Harry stopped in the doorway of the room Maggie and Ginny were sharing. They were sitting on the bed, talking excitedly. He couldn't remember when he'd seen Ginny looking happier, and he couldn't help the smile that crept across his face as he looked at her. Then Ginny looked up and met his gaze; she smiled at him with such a mix of gratitude and just plain being glad to see him that his heart turned over, and he wanted to freeze that moment in time, just seeing her look at him like that forever.

Without warning, she sprang across the room and launched herself at him. He held her to him convulsively, as she cried, "Oh, Harry, thank you so much! If it weren't for you —"

Harry met Maggie's eye then; she looked back at him knowingly and gave him a small sympathetic smile. She could tell how he felt about Ginny — maybe it showed in one of his auras? — but she knew, of course,

that Draco was Ginny's boyfriend. There was a touch of sadness in her eyes.

Sirius touched him on the shoulder and he jumped away from Ginny guiltily, half-expecting to see Draco Malfoy. They followed him down the stairs, picking up the others on the way. Draco and Ron were already in the kitchen, eating cold chicken, sliced tomatoes and bread and butter. Sirius put out plates and utensils and everyone else helped themselves to the food, which included fresh strawberries to finish. It was a merry late-summer-evening feast, and when they'd picked the two chicken carcasses clean and gone through two loaves of bread and polished off all of the tomatoes and strawberries, the yawning starting to become an epidemic, and they went back up to their rooms again.

Harry looked longingly after Ginny, disappearing into the other room on the top floor with her sister, before turning to his own. Sirius looked at him with one eyebrow raised. "I thought you had a new girlfriend. Anything you'd like to tell me?"

Harry grimaced. "Not right now, thanks", he said. It was strange; once he thought he *could* tell Sirius anything. Now he wanted to see Severus Snape to talk to him; he was so used to going to his stepfather, in his other life. It seemed odd to turn to anyone else. "I'm knackered; maybe tomorrow?" he said to Sirius. He needed to start thinking of Sirius as the one he could talk to, he realized. He needed to make an effort; Sirius had opened his home to him, had done so much for him. "And you can tell me about Wormtail's confession."

Sirius nodded. "Fair enough."

Suddenly, there was a light rapping on the door and Harry went to answer it. It was Katie. "Well, don't look so glad to see me or anything", she said shrewdly, noticing the way his expression of anticipation changed when he saw who it was.

"It's not — I mean, I was — I'm surprised to see you up here..."

"After last night? Or this morning, I should say..."

Harry looked around nervously. "I can't — I mean, we can't — Sirius is —" he whispered awkwardly.

"Oh, I'm not here to crawl into bed with you. I mean, having ghosts in bed with you is one thing; your godfather is quite another." Her eyes twinkled at him and he laughed. "I just came upstairs to say goodnight properly."

"Well", Sirius said suddenly at Harry's elbow, making him jump. "That's my cue to disappear for a few minutes, I believe." He winked at Harry and moved toward the bathroom.

"Oh! Sirius — you don't have to —"

But the door to the bathroom had already closed and they were suddenly standing alone in his new room. Katie walked to the large window seat, then sat down. "This is fantastic, isn't it? Practically another bed..."

She smiled mischievously at Harry and he sat next to her, looking out at the summer night. One of the narrow leaded casement windows was open slightly, and a cool breeze touched Harry's face as he looked out at the stars. *My new home*, he thought, the idea still very odd to him. He'd had a new home the moment he'd arrived in his other life, the previous September, but it was actually a home where he'd lived for over ten years, so technically it wasn't. He was beginning a new life.

He looked down at the girl sitting next to him, the girl with whom he'd shared a bed just that morning. He idly pushed her hair behind one ear, looking at her fondly, then leaned in to kiss her goodnight. After a few moments, she pushed him away.

"Don't do that, Harry."

He looked at her, bewildered. "Don't do what?"

She looked at him grimly. "Kiss me out of obligation, or guilt. I mean —" She looked frustrated at not being able to communicate her thoughts adequately. "Don't attach more meaning to this morning than — than just two people who like each other and like spending time together having — fun. All right?"

Harry swallowed. Was she trying to keep from being hurt? The truth was he *did* feel obliged to kiss her, and considering that she'd come up two flights just for the purpose, he was feeling a little cross now.

"Well, you *did* come up here for this, didn't you?" he said irritably.

"For a simple we're-still-having-fun-aren't-we kiss. Not an oh-god-here-comes-the-ball-and-chain-kiss. Or are you *trying* to make me feel about forty?"

"No, I —" But suddenly, she'd leaned in and captured his lips with hers again, her soft mouth opening gently under his, the taste of her minty toothpaste on his hard palate...

He slid his hand into her soft hair now, pulling her head closer, forgetting his trepidation. When they both pulled back from the kiss, Katie smiled gently at him. "There now. *That's* why I came upstairs."

He was holding her against him now, her small body wrapped in a lightweight dressing gown over a thin T-shirt. Harry's mouth grew dry as he remembered being with her that morning...

After a few minutes, she forced herself to stand and kissed him on the forehead, next to his scar. "Now I can go to sleep. Good night, Harry", she smiled at him.

As she walked toward the door, he couldn't help look at her legs beneath the hem of the rather short dressing gown. "Good night, Katie", he said absently, watching those legs disappear.

Sirius emerged from the bathroom; he had a glimpse of Katie in the hall, before she started going down the stairs again. He closed the door, smiling. He was wearing pajama bottoms and drying his face with small towel.

"I was starting to think I was going to wind up on the floor in the sitting room, with Draco and Ron..."

"What?" Harry said at first; when Sirius raised his eyebrows at him, he understood. "Oh; someone must have told you about this morning."

His godfather nodded. "Ron. He called it 'Harry's habit'. I suppose you don't want to talk about *that* yet, either."

Harry rolled his eyes. *Ron*. "Not even remotely."

Sirius grinned at him. "That's all right; neither do I. Your turn in the bathroom."

Harry washed up and changed into pajama pants, finding Sirius fast asleep and snoring when he returned. He climbed into the enormous bed, which could have slept four small or three large people, and he was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

* * *

After all of the anticipation, Harry's seventeenth birthday passed in a whirl of activity. When it was all over, he felt almost as though he'd hallucinated it all. Although Ascog Castle had five floors of living space above the ground, and two levels of dungeons below, it wasn't very spacious, since the large square courtyard took up a good deal of room in the corner of the property's footprint. Sirius explained to him in the morning that it was more properly called a tower house, but many mere tower houses had long

gone by the title 'castle'. Ascog was tiny at a mere forty-two feet on a side. And yet, it seemed to Harry, it must have been magically enlarged to hold so many people for his birthday party.

There was a constant stream of guests coming and going in the kitchen, sitting room, courtyard, up and down the stairs, on the roof patio, and even in the dungeons (the lower dungeon level had an magically heated swimming pool). More and more people seemed to be arriving as the day progressed; walking out of the fireplace in the sitting room, coming up the stairs from the dungeon after Apparating. (Sirius had appointed one of the empty cells down there as the approved Apparition point — and you had to leave the cell very quickly in case of others arriving right after you.)

Hermione surprised him by arriving on the roof by Portkey and then walking down the stairs to the landing outside his room just as he was leaving to get breakfast. "Harry!" she cried, throwing her arms around him. He held her closely; she was deeply tanned and her short curls were touched by the sun. After hugging her he backed up and looked at her.

"Hermione — you look fabulous! How's — all the training going?"

Then he practically fell over in shock when Professor McGonagall walked down the stairs from the roof as well. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that Potter knows about that?" she said sharply, looking as stern as she did at school, until Harry noticed a smile twisting the corner of her mouth. She turned to Harry. "She's doing very well. I've been looking forward to teaching her this ever since her first year... I just had a feeling about her..."

Harry tried not to sound *too* upset, but it was difficult. "You never said that about *me*."

McGonagall actually displayed a full, rare smile now. "When you perform beyond anyone's expectations, Harry", she said, using his first name now, "you have the advantage. When everyone has high expectations, there's far more to live up to."

Hermione and Professor McGonagall joined them for breakfast, which had to be eaten in installments, as there were so many people in the house now. When they entered the kitchen, the Weasleys were still sitting at the table, and Mrs. Weasley said, "Oh, hello Minerva! I didn't know we'd be seeing you. And hello, Hermione, dear. How are you?"

But Hermione never had a chance to answer, because Maggie rose and walked around the table slowly. "You're Hermione?" she whispered.

Hermione looked at her, swallowing.

"I don't have to ask who *you* are", she said softly, as the older woman enfolded her in a hug. Then Molly put her hand over her mouth.

"Oh, my stars, that's right — you also — you — you —"

Hermione saved her the trouble of getting up and came to her to give her a hug.

"I can't thank you enough", Mrs. Weasley started to say, dabbing at her eyes.

Then Ron entered the kitchen from the entrance hall and Hermione looked at him lovingly. "You don't have to", she told his mother quietly.

When Ron saw her, he hesitated for a moment, but then she ran to him and threw her arms around him, and he held her carefully, trying not to hurt her, and Harry could see his heart on his face. He suddenly felt very protective of them both. *Nothing must happen to them*, he thought. *Nothing must tear them apart*.

But soon Ron was joking around again, his arm lightly around Hermione, and they were all laughing, laughing, for so much of the day, Harry's face started hurting. He couldn't help grinning as each new friend or teacher appeared. Hagrid had some difficulty emerging from the fireplace, and Harry thought he would break the mantle. More school friends began to appear: Neville, Parvati and Padma, Seamus, Dean (who'd been staying with Seamus' family, and used the Finnigan fireplace for transport, as Seamus had), the crowd from Hog's End (including Lee, whom Katie greeted quite naturally), other Gryffindors, including Will Flitwick, who looked around for Jamaica Thomas, disappointed when he didn't see her. His great uncle, little Professor Flitwick came, as well as Professor Sprout. Alastor Moody came right after his sister, Arabella. She looked annoyed by the noise in the rather full house, but that was nothing new to Harry. In his experience, the only noise Mrs. Figg *didn't* mind was the sound of her own bellowing voice.

Then when *he* emerged from the fireplace, Harry wanted to run and hug him, but he forced himself instead to extend his hand, grinning at the normally stern Potions Master, who had undergone some sort of transformation in the month since Harry had last seen him. He looked as though he'd decided to model himself on the Severus Snape Harry had shown him in the Pensieve. His hair was shorter and pulled back into a ponytail, he had a closely-trimmed beard and mustache defining the planes

of his gaunt face, and he was wearing what looked like new robes, in a strangely shimmering material that sometimes looked grey and sometimes silver, and where the light hit the fabric, there was a slight rainbow effect.

Severus Snape gave him a lopsided grin as he took his hand; then Harry looked down in shock. "Your hands! They're all right!"

He held up his large hands and waggled his ten perfect fingers. "The miracle of magical medicine. Rather painful to grow back, but fingers are at least possible. They're small. Larger limbs are another story of course. And I don't have full feeling in these yet", he said, indicating the smallest fingers on each hand. "That's supposed to improve over time." He stopped abruptly and stared, a perplexed look on his face.

"How — who —?"

Harry turned. Maggie was standing in the sitting room doorway, looking at Severus Snape with a dumbstruck expression on her face. It reminded Harry of how shocked Hermione had been by the sight of young Snape in the Pensieve.

"That's one of Ginny's long-lost sisters. Do you remember hearing about it? In 1979 —"

"I remember", he said quickly, stopping Harry, never taking his eyes from her. "I remember it well." Harry didn't ask him to elaborate; clearly, everyone who was around then remembered the case of the missing Weasley sisters.

Maggie walked unsteadily over to Harry and said, looking at Severus Snape the entire time, "Aren't you going to introduce me, Harry?"

Harry did, but he wasn't entirely certain she or his professor had heard anything he said; their eyes seemed to be locked by a beam of light. They wandered out of the room together and Harry wondered where Sirius was.

Then Remus Lupin emerged from the fire, brushing off his usual shabby robes, and Harry greeted him with a hug. "Happy birthday, Harry!" he said, grinning.

Harry grinned back. "So far it is", he said cautiously; he almost felt like things were going too well, like something had to go wrong soon or he'd think he was dreaming. People were filling every room in the house, it seemed, walking around with bottles of butterbeer and plates of finger food, chatting and laughing. Someone had turned on the wireless, the sound wafting out of the windows, and people were dancing in the courtyard. The children ran around the adults' legs, playing games, and

Harry stood back, watching it all happily, enjoying the chaos of his birthday party.

Finally, just before they were attempting to get everyone together to sing, Professor Dumbledore arrived. He walked calmly up the dungeon stairs from the Apparition point. Harry was passing from the sitting room into the kitchen, getting some more butterbeer, and he stopped in shock when he saw him.

"Professor!"

The old man smiled broadly at Harry. "Happy birthday, Harry. Ah, I see the festivities are in full swing. Good, good. It's not every day you turn seventeen, after all."

Harry felt their number was complete now. Soon he was standing in the middle of the throng in the courtyard, the cake on a small table before him as they all sang, *"For he's a jolly good fellow, for he's a jolly good fellow, for he's a jolly good feh-eh-LO! And so say all of us!"*

And then there was cheering and backslapping and too many girls kissing him for him to keep track, and slices of cake being passed around... As the whirl continued, Harry became dimly aware that the crowd was becoming smaller and smaller, until finally, as the sun was going down, and torches flared to life on the walls of the courtyard and also inside the house, they were almost reduced again to the people who'd slept at Ascog the night before. The only others who remained were Snape, Lupin, Hermione and the Weasleys.

Once the crowd had thinned, Harry became aware of the pile of presents in the corner of the courtyard. He waved his hand at them. "These can't be — are these —"

Ron grinned at him, his arm draped casually around Hermione's shoulders now and her arm around his waist. She looked happier than Harry had ever seen her. "That's right, mate. They're for you. Thought you'd never notice. Ever planning to open them?"

Ginny and Draco and Katie had come over, plus Snape and Sirius and Lupin. through the kitchen windows, Harry could see Maggie sitting at the kitchen table, talking to her parents, Bill and Charlie (who had arrived when Harry wasn't looking), the twins (plus Angelina) and Percy, all of whom had been completely shocked to see her. Bill and Charlie had been completely overwhelmed and had gone through the house hunting Harry down. For a few minutes, they wouldn't stop hugging him and shaking his

hand. The Weasleys had stayed together in small clumps all during the party, talking non-stop, repairing their family and starting to make up for the seventeen years of Maggie's absence.

Harry strode over to the pile of gifts, not knowing where to begin, but suddenly Sandy was hissing to him.

"*News comes on the wing*," she said softly. Harry had to strain to hear her over the voices of the others; he squinted in concentration and tilted his head to one side. Then he happened to look up and meet Ron's and Hermione's eyes.

They came closer to him, and Ron whispered to him, "*What is it, Harry?*"

"Nothing, really. I think an owl will be coming soon. Sandy said."

"An owl for whom?" Hermione whispered. Harry shrugged, then gestured with his head at the others. The three of them broke up their little conference, trying to look natural about this, and Harry looked again at the presents. He noticed an oblong package, and extracted it from the pile. Most of it was very thin, but it widened at one end. He looked up, smiling at everyone. "I think I can guess what *this* is", he said, opening it, and finding a beautiful, gleaming new *Firebolt 2*.

"Now, I expect you to take care of *this* one, Harry", Sirius said, breaking down into a smile, unable to maintain his stern facade. Next to him, Snape bristled.

"The last one was destroyed in a good cause", he said archly. Yes, thought Harry, it was.

Sirius laughed. "I thought that's why you wouldn't mind contributing a bit toward it."

"Well, actually", Harry reminded him, "I shouldn't have had you get that Firebolt Excelsior for me at the end of last term. It was always going off half-cocked, and then when I gave Ron a chance to ride it, before he could even get on, it went flying up into the clouds and was gone."

Sirius frowned. "That model was experimental. This one as the kinks worked out."

Harry looked round, frowning. "So — who is this one from, really?"

"Well, you know how I said your first Firebolt was something like thirteen years' worth of birthdays and Christmases? I couldn't very well do that again so soon — I'd be cleaned out of all my savings. But Severus here generously contributed, as you were saving his arse when your last

one was ruined, and Remus did too, as well as Arabella, Alastor, Fletcher, your other professors — including Dumbledore — Aberforth, and Katie's dad."

Harry's jaw dropped. "You're joking", he said weakly, staring again at the beautiful deep brown mahogany handle, gleaming in the bright torchlight with its iron-hard finish, the name emblazoned on the broad part near the end in gold paint edged in red, also protected under the finish. He'd never seen a more beautiful broom in his entire life.

"So", Sirius said, watching his rapture happily, "the next time you have to go rescue some excuse for a Potions Master, you take a school broom and save that one for winning the Quidditch World Cup —"

Even Snape laughed at that; Harry thought it was wonderful to see him do it, something he remembered well from his other life. He said, "At the rate I've gone through brooms, maybe I should go to work for a broom company after I'm done school; then I'll be guaranteed a steady supply." He suddenly stopped. Hey, he thought. That was actually not a bad idea. *Apply to work at a broom company.* Develop new brooms. It definitely had appeal for him, as much as he loved flying. He wasn't so sure about the World Cup, though, especially after finding out his father had played for England; he remembered what McGonagall had said about expectations.

Before he could get to another present, though, a sudden flurry of owls crowding the bit of twilit sky above them caused them all to look up. The birds began to drop squares of parchment into the hands of the people in the courtyard, and a few flew through the windows into the kitchen, bringing their burdens to the twins, Percy, and Angelina, who was also sitting with them. When the owls had flown off again, Harry looked at his, perplexed; it was a large creamy square with his name written on the front in a loopy script he didn't recognize. He looked up and saw the others opening theirs. All of the envelopes looked the same except for the different names on the fronts. Sirius didn't have one, he noticed. Neither did Hermione.

Katie was first to get hers open. Her eyes went wide. Then she opened another envelope that had been inside the larger one. This one was smaller and lighter. As she read the letter in this envelope, her face went rigid with anger. She looked up now, waving her letter indignantly.

"That bloody bitch!"

Signs

Harry stared at Katie with his mouth open. "*Katie!*" he finally said in shock. Realizing that everyone was staring at her, she reddened and looked up.

"Oh, um — did I say that out loud?" she replied, her voice suddenly taking on a much meeker tone as she looked around, more than a little embarrassed.

Harry moved quickly to put his arm around her shoulder. "What's wrong?" he wanted to know. By now the twins and Angelina had emerged from the house, waving their envelopes in agitation.

"Can you *believe* her?" Angelina was saying to Katie, her voice squeaking. Angelina *never* squeaked.

"I am *not* standing up with that bugger", said Fred.

"No way", George agreed.

Harry was still holding his envelope. He took his arm from around Katie and quickly tore the envelope open, finding a slightly smaller interior envelope with a stiff card inside. He couldn't believe what was printed on the card:

*Mr. and Mrs. Robert N. Spinnet
request the honor of your presence
at the wedding of their daughter
Alicia Louise*

to

Roger Edwin Davies

*Saturday, the thirtieth of August, nineteen-hundred and ninety-
seven*

Four o'clock in the afternoon

Old St. Martin's Church

Kettering, Northamptonshire

Reception to follow at Spinnet Farm, Sywell, Northamptonshire

The favor of a reply is requested

Then he saw that, like Katie, he had another smaller envelope. In this one there was a hand-written note from Alicia.

Dear Harry,

I know this is dreadfully short notice, but as you can see from the invitation, I'm getting married. I wanted to have my old classmates and Quidditch teammates stand up with me, and Roger wanted his mates. That started to seem like quite a lot of attendants, so we agreed I would ask the women and he would ask the men. Well, none of the Ravenclaw men he asked would do it. They all made excuses of one sort or another. His dad's standing up with him as his best man, in place of his brother, so that would leave him with no other groomsmen and me with a passel of bridesmaids and no one to escort them.

So I convinced Roger to let me get the groomsmen too, and he asked some of his female teammates to be bridesmaids as a compromise. One of them actually said she would do it. Also, I had to agree to a female relative of his being my maid-of-honor, even though I won't be meeting her until the day before the ceremony! I've been pulling my hair out over this — I can't believe how difficult it's been. That's why I'm so late in sending this to you. It was about time to send the invitations, so I thought I'd send this request along too.

Please, please, PLEASE say you'll be a groomsman, Harry. I know Roger probably isn't your favorite person, but I always thought you and I were friends. (It was so good of you to come to read to my class last term.) I do hope you will respond by saying `yes'.

Hopefully,

Alicia

P.S. The party after will be at my parents' estate in Sywell, which isn't far off Kettering. You — along with the rest of the wedding party — are invited to stay for the week before the ceremony. It's the least I can do since I've asked you to help me and Roger so late in the game. Do say you'll come?

— A.

Harry looked up at the others in shock. "She wants me to be a groomsman", he said, knowing that the others would know what he meant, as they were all reading the invitations too. Katie waved hers around some more.

"Not *one word*," Katie said now, sounding very irritated again. "I was just in Hogsmeade, and I *saw* her! We had dinner together, and for two hours she never said a *thing*. I thought they *hated* each other. He was seeing that French girl! Now she wants me to be a *bridesmaid* and watch her marry that — that —"

"And me", Angelina added. "Plus she wants Fred and George to be groomsmen as well. *And* she wants me to run around and do all of the things the maid-of-honor would do, since Roger's aunt or cousin or whoever she is can't do it, but I'm still not going to actually *be* the maid-of-honor!" Angelina was livid; Harry had never seen her so angry.

Ginny frowned; she had a personal note from Alicia, too. "Did you *see* the list of attendants?" she asked no one in particular. Harry turned his letter over; it was written on the back.

Best man: Ambrose Davies
Maid-of-honor: Bronwen Davies
Bridesmaid #1: Angelina Johnson
Groomsman #1: Fred Weasley
Bridesmaid #2: Katie Bell
Groomsman #2: Lee Jordan
Bridesmaid #3: Ginny Weasley
Groomsman #3: Oliver Wood
Bridesmaid #4: Cho Chang
Groomsman #4: Harry Potter
Bridesmaid #5: Yarrow Swartz
Groomsman #5: George Weasley

Harry's jaw dropped. No. He could *not* walk down the aisle of a church with Cho Chang on his arm, not after being responsible for *two* of her

boyfriends being dead. Well, that solved the mystery of the identity of the female Ravenclaw player who'd agreed to be in the wedding party. And then there was the not-so-small matter of his part in the death of Roger's brother Evan... "I — I can't be paired with *Cho* —" he said slowly, incredulous.

"Well, she's paired *me* with *Lee*!" Katie exclaimed.

"*And* she's put my girlfriend with my brother!" George cried indignantly. "No offense, Fred, but —"

Fred looked at his copy of the list, his mouth twisting. "Perhaps she thought it would be funny to pair up former boyfriends and girlfriends?" he guessed; he actually did sound a bit amused to Harry. "I'm glad she put me with you, though", he said lightly to Angelina. "We've always got on well, before and after dating. It could have been really bad for me; Yarrow and I broke up after a dreadful row."

George rolled his eyes. "Brilliant. And as your double, I'll be right next to her, reminding her that she's still hacked off at you. C'mon, Fred, no one will know if we swap. Angelina's the only one who can ever tell us apart. You take your lumps from Yarrow and let me be with my girl..." Somewhere along the line, the twins seemed to have changed their minds and were now planning to be in the wedding party. Harry wondered who had turned Roger down. How do you turn away a friend who asks you to stand up with him at his wedding? Evidently, a number of Ravenclaws had found a way.

Katie looked up at Harry hopefully. "Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if we could convince her to redo the pairings. I don't see how I could possibly do this otherwise..." Harry didn't say so, but he heartily agreed. Except — he looked down at the list and saw that Ginny was a bridesmaid too. *If there was a particular bridesmaid I'd like to be paired with...*

"Ow!" Hermione cried suddenly, staggering as a rather large package struck her on the head. Ron caught her arm to steady her and check to see that she was all right. Another owl had unexpectedly flown into the courtyard with the package that had fallen on her. It lay at her feet now, and Harry could see that her name was written on the brown paper covering the flat rectangular box. He looked up; as it flew off, the owl appeared to be very relieved to be rid of its burden. It resembled the other owls that had delivered the invitations. If it also came from Alicia, he reasoned, the heavy load must have caused the delay.

Rubbing her head, Hermione knelt on the ground to rip the paper off the box and open it. Lying on top of a stack of papers in the box was another wedding invitation. Under that was a smaller envelope with Hermione's name in Alicia's flowing handwriting. Hermione withdrew the letter from this envelope and read, her jaw dropping as Katie's had done.

"She — she wants me to play the cello at the wedding. Listen to this, `I know it's dreadfully short notice, but I've heard from Katie how wonderfully you play and hope you will do this favor for a fellow Gryffindor, one Head Girl to another'."

Hermione bent over the box again. "I don't believe it. She's sent music. She just *assumed*..."

"What?" Ron exclaimed, indignant on her behalf.

"The *nerve*", Angelina breathed incredulously.

They were all positively reeling; Alicia couldn't have jolted them all more if she'd sent wedding invitations that were also howlers. Katie looked at Harry now.

"So — are you going to do it?"

He looked at her seriously, aware of Ginny out of the corner of his eye. "I — I suppose. I'm still a bit shocked, of course. I never thought when I saw her and Roger in her classroom last spring that —"

He froze. Everyone was dead silent, staring at him. *Damn*, he thought. *Know when to keep your mouth shut, Potter.*

"Saw them?" Angelina said suspiciously.

"Saw them *how*?" Katie wanted to know. Harry felt cornered.

"Erm — they were kissing and then they Disapparated", he said in a rush, half-hoping no one would be able to understand him.

"You *knew*?" Katie cried, her voice going up.

"I thought Fleur was your friend, too", Ginny said quietly now. Harry looked at her, feeling very, very small. *Right*, he thought, remembering Fleur asking him in the corridor of the school whether he'd seen Roger.

Not a person around him didn't look shocked except for Severus Snape, who actually looked slightly amused.

"Harry", Hermione said, shaking her head. "I'm surprised at you..."

"Well — well —" he sputtered. "It was Alicia! I feel like she's more my friend than Fleur is, frankly. I was rather surprised they were together, but it didn't seem like it was any of my business..."

Hermione seemed to be thinking along another track now. "They *never* got on when they were Head Girl and Head Boy. Who could have seen *this* coming?"

Upon this everyone agreed. The party had come to a logical conclusion, and they all moved indoors to sit around the kitchen table. Mrs. Weasley, as it turned out, was rather excited about the wedding.

"Oh", Hermione said brightly, "were you invited too, Mrs. Weasley?"

"Oh, no dear, but do you know how rarely I've seen my boys in formal dress robes? I want to take a picture when you get them, Fred and George, and don't try to squirm out of it. I never did get a photograph of the pair of you at the Yule Ball in your sixth year."

Hermione poured herself some cold water from a pitcher on the table before sitting. "Oh, I doubt they'll be wearing dress robes, Mrs. Weasley. Alicia's Muggle-born, and the wedding's at a church in Kettering. They'll probably be in Muggle formalwear."

Fred and George looked at each other in horror. Harry fought the urge to laugh. Katie sat next to him and gave him a *look*.

"Hmm. Now, that doesn't sound so bad. *You'll* look nice all dressed up, Harry..." she said, a glimmer in her eye that made him swallow.

"*Meanwhile*", Angelina intoned ominously, "we will be wearing the bridesmaid dresses from hell, no doubt. Can't have anyone in the wedding party outshining the bride on her `special day'."

Ginny's face fell. "Oh. Do you think they'll be *very* bad?" she asked Angelina.

"*Bad?*" Angelina said, sounding like she was just getting started. "Last summer I was in the wedding of my cousin Charlotte, who married a Muggle. And *she* had us wearing these things that made us look like giant walking bowls of trifle!"

"But you were such a *charming* giant walking bowl of trifle", George said, starting to laugh and just barely managing to stifle it. "Which, face it, is better than a giant walking blancmange, which is what the bride looked like. And then there was that thing on your head —"

"— *like the cherry on top of the whipped cream!*" Angelina told Ginny, who looked even more horrified. George couldn't take it anymore and began laughing in earnest, and Fred as well. Angelina whirled on them both. "And you!" she said testily to George. "Leave all merchandise *at*

home. Honestly! It's a good thing Charlotte's best friend is an Obliviator —"

Mrs. Weasley looked sternly at George. "*What* did you do?"

George smiled feebly at her and shrugged. "I just took a few Canary Creams. I only meant them for the witches and wizards. I knew there were Muggles there. I didn't mean for them to have any, honestly. I was just hoping to drum up more business. A social event like that is good for making contacts. It's not my fault, is it, that the groom's aunt was wearing a kind of caftan that looked like robes? I thought she was a witch." He smiled ingratiatingly at his mother, who was *not* looking at all amused.

"Well", Hermione said darkly, "there's bound to be loads of important Muggles at Alicia's wedding. Her mother does a lot of charity work, and I think I heard her father might actually try for parliament. They don't much like their MP." She sniffed. "He's Tory, of course, more's the pity..."

Hermione's political rant fell on deaf ears as far as Ron was concerned. "Well, what do plain old guests wear? I'm invited too — can I just wear standard-issue Muggle things?"

Hermione smirked. "No. You'll have to be dressed up as well. You just won't be parading around on display, like the groomsmen." Harry thought she looked like she want a *private* display from him of some sort (Ron looked alarmed, as though he thought this, too) ; he managed to keep a straight face, looking at the pair of them, and suppressing a smirk of his own.

"Are you going to play?" Harry asked her. She shrugged, and started leafing through some of the music.

"A lot of these look like pieces I know. This could actually be manageable..."

Katie looked around in disbelief. "So — we're actually doing this?"

The twins looked far less upset now about `standing up with that bugger'. George raised his eyebrows. "Looks like we're being put up for a week by rich people in a country house, then standing around for a few minutes while a git says `I do', then going to a party", George said, looking at Fred. Fred raised his glass of pumpkin juice.

"Nice work, if you can get it."

"And Oliver'll be there, too!" George remembered.

"Right. He'll know the best things to do for the stag night, places to go —"

"A pity Roger has to be included, but as he's the groom —"

"*Stag night!*" Angelina looked outraged. George raised his eyebrows and looked at her with an expression of utter innocence.

"It's a tradition, you know. You'll have to do a hen party for Alicia, if you're the acting maid-of-honor."

Angelina looked very grumpy again at the idea of doing all of the maid-of-honor work and getting none of the glory for it. Harry reflected on how odd it was that Roger had approved his being named as a groomsman, after both Roger and his father accused him of practically murdering Evan in cold blood. They must have gotten past that, or decided he wasn't to blame, he thought.

Perhaps Alicia asking him to be a groomsman was meant to be their way of extending an olive branch. He didn't much like the idea of formalwear on the last Saturday in August, let alone being paired with Cho (of all people!). But if the Davies family was trying to make peace with him, it wouldn't be very good form to throw it in their faces and refuse to participate in the wedding.

"You're *really* doing it?" Katie said quietly to him, sitting at his side, looking utterly shocked. He shrugged.

"How can I not? If it's Roger's way of making peace..."

She nodded. "I suppose I'm stuck as well. I can't believe she wants me to walk with *Lee*. I'll bet she's just laughing and laughing about this..."

He patted her hand. "It will all work out, I'm sure." He sounded surer than he felt. He'd rather face Roger than Cho any day. He didn't really feel all that guilty about Evan, frankly, given that the Ravenclaw had attacked him and others in the forest. Cedric was quite another story, and Viktor...

As it was getting late, Snape and Lupin made their farewells. Snape was very formal, nodding at Harry before stepping into the fireplace. Lupin grinned at him, eyes crinkling up, as he too disappeared into the flames, going back to his flat in Manchester. He would be returning tomorrow, however, to do some training with Ron.

The Weasleys were going by Floo as well, taking Maggie with them. They would return with her in a few days to retrieve her car. The boys were going with them to the Burrow, all but Ron, for a continuation of the family reunion. Ginny was also staying; Hermione would be sharing a room with her instead of Maggie now. McGonagall had already Apparated

back to the Granger house in Greenwich, to which Hermione would return in a few days, after enjoying a brief holiday at Ascog.

With the Weasleys gone, Ron and Draco were able to move up to the guestroom. After seeing off the Weasley family through the fireplace in the sitting room (Angelina went by herself to Hog's End, still fuming about the wedding), they all moved off to bed in a daze. Harry felt as though he was under a bit of a cloud, remembering how shocked everyone had looked when they realized he'd known about Roger and Alicia...

* * *

"Harry! Call for you!" Sirius' voice came through the thick bathroom door, just a bit muffled. "And it's my turn in the bloody bath!"

Harry finished drying himself after his shower; as he scrambled into his clothes he called, "Just a minute!" trying not to fall over while putting on his khaki shorts.

"Why are you rushing, Harry Potter?" Sandy asked him placidly from her comfortable position on a fluffy white towel by the side of the sink. She watched him stumble about. "Did I not tell you —"

"Yeah, yeah", he muttered. Sometimes people with the Sight — human or snake — could be very trying. He left her in the bathroom; she liked being in there with the steam and humidity, and he would collect her later. He was still pulling down his T-shirt, his hair dripping, as he walked to the small fireplace in his bedroom, stopping at the desk to pick up his glasses first. Sirius went into the bath and closed the door. The moment Harry put his glasses on and looked at the fireplace he almost fell over in shock. Sitting in the firebox was a head, and it was the last head he ever expected to see in a fireplace anywhere.

"Hello, Harry."

"H — hullo, Aunt Petunia." He was at a loss for words, just staring. Then his aunt's head disappeared and Mrs. Figg's took her place.

She had opened her mouth to speak, but oddly enough it was Sirius' voice that came out. "*Harry!*" his godfather bellowed from the bath. "You left your sodding snake in here!"

He turned toward the closed door. "She likes the damp!" he called. "Just ignore her! I'll get her later!" He turned back to the fireplace. Mrs. Figg was looking distinctly miffed.

"*Good morning*, Harry. I didn't really get a chance to speak with you at the party yesterday, but then you *are* rather easily distracted at times." She

pursed her lips and looked so much like Professor McGonagall he had to stifle a laugh. "I wanted to contact you to tell you how everything is *here*." Judging from the pinched expression on her face, Harry had a suspicious feeling that things were not going dreadfully well.

"Is — is Aunt Petunia doing a *great deal* of magic?" he asked softly. Suddenly, his aunt's head was in the firebox again.

"I can't believe how rigid Arabella is being, Harry! I mean, she modified the vicar's memory, he'll never realize —"

Harry stood up, his eyes widening. "*What did you do?*"

Mrs. Figg's head reappeared, frowning deeply. Her face had been heavily lined before; now its fissures vied with her brother's for cragginess, and she didn't look as though she'd had a good night's sleep recently. "This isn't the time, Harry. This is *meant* to be good news. Earlier this week, Petunia and I went to that specialist in London, and she's been doing visualization exercises designed to affect her cells... We're going to go back later this month to see whether there's been any change. The doctor thought she was some kind of New Age nutter. Told her to go to California if she's so convinced crystals will cure her of cancer instead of the most advanced modern medicine." She sniffed disdainfully. "I almost told him, 'Yes, we might very well go to California'. I happen to know a shaman who lives in the desert on the way from Los Angeles to Vegas... he's dealt with this sort of thing before..."

Harry's eyes were practically falling out of his head. "Er, well. That's good news, then, right?" The idea of his aunt doing magic in front of Mr. Babcock was still rather alarming to him. He didn't dare ask again what she'd done. "Any news about that phony milkman, by the way? Any sign of Rodney Jeffries?"

"Funny you should ask. Sirius will tell you more about it, but it seems the milkman was going to provide a base of operations — unbeknownst to him — for that Daisy Furuncle person. She wanted a close place from which to observe you, and because of Albus' protective charms on your house, that was the nearest she could get."

He furrowed his brow. "You know, I never did understand the way the protective charms worked..."

"Well, you may have noticed that someone who doesn't intend to harm you and who is magical can come to your aunt and uncle's house with no problem." That was true. Fred, George and Ron were able to rescue him

with their father's flying car during the summer before his second year. And Dobby, who had actually meant well, had no problem penetrating the charms either. Sirius and Snape had also just walked up to number four, Privet Drive and gained admittance when they were bringing Hermione and her parents there. "Someone with less than friendly impulses, however..."

"Right. And Jeffries?"

"We don't actually have him in our sights, but there have been reports of people being healed of injuries by a stranger who mysteriously disappears again. His entourage is still missing as well. The families of the Muggles who were working with him are starting to raise a stink with the government, especially the American families. Some of them are evidently threatening Whitehall with an international incident if their people don't turn up soon. Something about Britain being a haven for charlatan cult-leaders; an American embassy employee who was working in Paris going missing... her father is in the President's cabinet or some such thing... I can't keep track of it all..."

That was Grace. Harry's breath caught. *All because his aunt threw Jeffries against the dais!*

Sirius opened the bathroom door and emerged, his hair still damp from his shower, although he was busily rubbing his head with a towel. "Coming to breakfast, Harry?"

Harry turned for a moment, then looked uncertainly at Mrs. Figg.

"Go on, don't let me keep you. I just thought you might like to know about Petunia. There's nothing you can do about Jeffries..."

He drew his lips into a line. "Right. Well, goodbye, Aunt Petunia", he called. Her head appeared beside Mrs. Figg's. "Be *good*", he added sternly. She grimaced.

"I'll *try*. But sometimes I just —"

He laughed at the expression on her face. "I know just what you mean." But then he realized, *No, I don't. I'm of age now. I can do magic any time I want.*

"Goodbye, Harry", Mrs. Figg said briskly. "Go have your breakfast now." And with a *pop!* her head and his aunt's head disappeared from the fireplace and the fire went with them. Which was just as well; on the top floor of the castle, on the first day of August, it was already starting to feel quite warm.

Harry collected Sandy from the bath and wrapped her around his left arm. He and Sirius were the last ones downstairs to eat; Ron and Draco Malfoy were still sitting at the table, but their breakfast dishes had been pushed to the side. A chessboard was between them now and they were deeply involved in a game while Hermione and Ginny watched. Katie was rolling her eyes at this, even as she read the morning edition of the *Daily Prophet*.

"They're both proving their *manhood*", she cracked to Harry and Sirius, turning the page of the paper. "Grunt a little more, you two", she instructed them. "Scratch something you shouldn't scratch in public."

Malfoy scowled at her. "We're not Neanderthals. Or at least *I'm* not", he added, looking pointedly at Ron, who grinned back at him.

"Is a Neanderthal likely to say `checkmate?'" He moved his queen into position; Malfoy's king was in her sights. If he moved the king out of danger from the queen, Ron would get him with either his knight or bishop. Malfoy stared at the board for a while before he threw up his hands in frustration. Ron wasn't trying very hard at all not to look smug.

"Good game, Malfoy", he said, his eyes twinkling at Hermione, who had a small smile. She actually seemed to notice Harry now.

"Oh, good morning, Harry. There are still some eggs warming in the oven. Want some?"

He accepted her offer and sat down, while the others rearranged themselves. He and Sirius ate quickly, and when they were done, Sirius looked very gravely at them and said, "We need to discuss Peter and his confession, Harry." Sirius was at the end of the kitchen table, the tapestry with the silver lion on the blue field behind him. Ron was now opposite Harry, to Sirius' left, Ginny and Hermione on either side of him. Katie was on one side of Harry and Draco Malfoy on the other.

"Should we all stay?" Katie asked, putting down her newspaper. Harry could tell she felt a little like she was intruding. Sirius nodded at her.

"There's no reason you can't stay. In fact, your history is involved as well, so you might as well stay and hear everything." He leaned close to her and Harry heard him say quietly, "I hear you're going to begin Auror training in September?" She nodded. "Well, you'll be hearing a number of top-secret things that aren't general knowledge. You understand you're to keep this information to yourself?" She nodded again, already looking a little numb.

Your history. Harry assumed that meant Sam killing her mum. Because of *him*. Katie looked very pale and stared down at her empty plate, looking like she wished she had more eggs or sausages or something to push around with her fork, to have something to do.

There was silence. "Well?" Harry said. "What are we waiting for?"

"Actually, it's not *what* but *who*. I asked Bill and Charlie to come and bring your sister", he said, nodding at Ginny and Ron.

"But she was going to be coming back in a few days anyway, to get her car. And why do you need her, or Charlie or Bill?" Ginny asked, perplexed. But Harry had a growing suspicion that he now felt was completely supported by what Sirius had said...

"It was him, wasn't it?" he said abruptly to Sirius. "Wormtail. Pettigrew. He kidnapped their sisters, didn't he?"

Sirius nodded slowly and Ginny put her hand over her mouth in horror, tears in her eyes. Ron put his arm around her and pulled her to him, his face grim and angry.

"How could he *do that* and then live with our family for *twelve years*?" she said through her tears. Ron was shaking his head.

"There's not much I would put beyond him at this point. When I think of what I did for him when he was my pet..."

"*What?*" Katie said suddenly. Harry turned to her.

"Er — that's what happened to Ron's rat, Scabbers. The one that used to be Percy's. It turns out he wasn't a rat at all, but Peter Pettigrew. Wormtail. He was an illegal Animagus." Her jaw hung open in disbelief, but she snapped it shut again when Sirius drummed the table impatiently. Sirius looked like he wished he hadn't said anything yet.

"We're also waiting for Severus and Remus. This concerns quite a lot. It all goes back to — a Prophecy." He looked uneasily at Harry.

Harry turned his head and looked at Draco Malfoy; they knew *which* Prophecy. The one *they* were in. Malfoy's eyes were very opaque, revealing no emotion. He looked away from Harry.

Suddenly, they heard someone moving about in the sitting room, evidently emerging from the fireplace. A moment later, Remus Lupin walked in the kitchen door.

"Ah! Here you all are." He sat beside Hermione. "Still waiting for the others, eh?" Before Sirius could answer, they heard someone else in the

sitting room, then several someone elses. Charlie came bouncing into the kitchen next, followed by Bill with his long stride.

"Hullo again, everyone", Charlie said, grinning. "Ripping to see you all. It's been absolutely ages." He sat next to Draco Malfoy, while Ginny rolled her eyes at him.

"Ha ha", she intoned unenthusiastically. Her brother, being a mature thirty-one years old, stuck his tongue out at her.

Bill sat next to Charlie and propped his elbows on the table. Harry leaned forward to see him better; he'd never seen Bill look more serious. He'd been grinning a great deal when he'd been thumping Harry's back the day before, after his role in finding Maggie had been revealed. He seemed very subdued now, in contrast.

Harry looked around. "Well — where's Maggie?"

Charlie looked toward the doorway. "She's coming. She stopped to talk —"

Harry frowned. Talk? But then he realized that he'd heard a number of people in the sitting room; now Maggie walked in, arm-in-arm with Severus Snape, making Rons's jaw drop. Hermione looked at Harry, raising her eyebrows. He thought he knew why; even at the party, the day before, he'd never seen Snape look so much like his younger self, the boy they'd originally seen in the Pensive, working in the potions dungeon with Harry's mother. He wore simple black robes, as when he was teaching, over black trousers and a simple crisp white shirt.

And he was *smiling*, which seemed to shock Draco Malfoy so much Harry wondered if he could at this moment get him to say, "*All Gryffindors are gods*," without batting an eye. Maggie and Severus Snape sat opposite her older brothers and next to Remus Lupin, whose face was utterly placid, as though he wasn't the least bit surprised about this development. Harry looked at Sirius, who frowned.

"Right", Sirius said briskly. He took a sip from a glass of pumpkin juice, then put it down and laid his hands on the table before him. "At the risk of going backwards, the first thing I'd like to address is Severus' abduction", he said, nodding at Snape. Maggie was now looking at him in alarm.

"You were abducted?" she said in shock.

He grimaced. "I don't know how he was doing it. The first time, I was supposed to be meeting another operative in Diagon Alley — that's in

London —" he added for Maggie's benefit, "— and then suddenly I was in a cottage far out in the country..." Harry wondered whether Pettigrew had again used the *Tempus fugit* spell. Snape told about the details of his imprisonment, which Harry had already heard from Dumbledore. The others, however, were listening with varying degrees of disbelief on their faces. Harry swallowed, thinking again of what Severus Snape had been enduring while they'd all been safely ensconced in the castle, learning potions from his uncle...

"Yes, well, Peter has finally explained *why* he imprisoned you", Sirius told him. "You see, during the first year after the Tournament, as Voldemort was gathering his old followers around him, Peter was carefully positioning himself so that no one would raise doubts about him and his loyalty, as he knew Voldemort doubting him would lead to his instant disposal. He reckoned that his assisting Voldemort in getting his body back would be very helpful to his being in the inner circle, but it wasn't a guarantee.

"Your dad was a major problem, for instance", he said to Draco Malfoy. "Competition. Turns out Peter was helping you to put him in prison, and you had no idea. There were evidently a number of times when your dad wondered whether he should trust you, and Peter talked him into continuing the plan you'd laid out. He said he came to Hogwarts in his Animagus form and overheard you having conversations with Ginny at the edge of the forest, where you thought no one was paying attention to you. So he'd figured out from the start what you were up to, and the only thing that worried him was whether you were trying to get rid of your father to take his place yourself. But he also reckoned he could dispose of you when the time came, if that was the case.

"Naturally, he couldn't be in all places at once, and while he was busying himself helping you get your dad out of the way, others began to plant seeds of doubt in Voldemort's mind concerning Peter. It was especially easy after that debacle on Christmas night, when we were trying to rescue poor stupid Karkaroff and prevent you", a nod at Draco, "from having to get the Dark Mark. If anyone in the organization was going to be suspected, we had hoped it would be Lucius Malfoy, but he evidently had an airtight alibi. Peter was watched very, very carefully after that, even though we're fairly certain he knew nothing about our botched operation. In addition to these new suspicions, the rumor-mongers were able to bring

up all of the old ones: about how he had managed to get himself appointed Secret Keeper on purpose, knowing that if he revealed the whereabouts of your parents", now he nodded at Harry, "Voldemort would be defeated. Now, it is true that he managed to get me to doubt myself and the next thing I knew, I was urging James and Lily to make him the Secret Keeper. Not knowing his involvement in the Death Eaters, it really did seem like the safest thing."

Sirius paused and rubbed his hand over his face for a moment, his facade of businesslike behavior threatening to crumble. He was still clearly very torn-up about this; Harry reckoned he always would be, just as he would never forgive himself for Cedric. Sirius cleared his throat and continued.

"However, I don't believe for a moment that Peter really knew what would happen when Voldemort went to Godric's Hollow that night. I believe he expected the entire family to be dead the next day. Well, James and Harry, anyway.

"He said he begged his Master to spare Lily. He told Voldemort that James was the 'first lion' and Harry the second, and once they were both destroyed, there was no need to bother with any of the other people in the Prophecy..."

Charlie's eyes widened. "Prophecy?" And yet, to Harry, it looked like he knew about this and was merely surprised that others knew, too.

Sirius sighed. "We'll get to that." Harry thought he saw him sending significant looks to Bill and Maggie. *Why?* Harry wondered. *What do they have to do with it?*

"Anyway, Peter's position in the organization had been growing more tenuous during the year after the Triwizard Tournament. He decided he needed to do something to sort of 'look busy' and loyal at the same time, while simultaneously protecting himself from Ministry reprisals, if he was caught by our side. Playing both sides against the middle has been Peter's *modus operandi* for years", Sirius added bitterly.

"He pretended to try to extract information from you", he said to Snape now, "but he said he didn't try very hard." Snape nodded.

"The most incompetent idiot I have ever seen", he growled; Harry would have laughed if it wasn't such a serious situation. The abductee criticizing his abductor's prowess. It was rather ridiculous. "Which", Snape went on, "was why it was so excruciating to continue to be held by him..."

"Right. He managed to *seem* useful by holding you for months on end, until finally Voldemort grew impatient and assigned his heir to help Peter get some truly *useful* information from Severus.

"The heir was, of course, Viktor Krum." Harry saw the stricken look on Hermione's face, perhaps remembering being in Bulgaria, *kissing* him, letting him get close to her; she was right to have been afraid of him, he thought. But they were certainly not right to have foisted him off on Cho Chang. She looked up at Ron now, who appeared to be feeling somewhat guilty — perhaps because of his own Krum hero-worship. "Krum had been initiated by his grandfather and was being trained by him and some of the most ruthless Death Eaters before arriving on Peter's doorstep. He wasn't interested in wasting time. He began torturing Severus in earnest."

He looked up at his old nemesis now, meeting his eyes. "But he didn't give up any information willingly. He'd developed an immunity against even the strongest Veritaserum by dosing himself with it over the years, so that he was able to convince them that the misinformation he was giving them while evidently under the potion's influence was true. We actually started racking up some successes in catching Death Eaters, since they believed his tales. That was short-lived. Unfortunately, it only took a few routs before they realized what he was doing.

"Finally, Krum resorted to torture that Muggles have long found successful..." He didn't finish, but looked down. Snape held up his hands.

"No lasting harm done", he reported, his deep voice smooth and calm. "I'll have full feeling again in the new fingers before long." Maggie went very white upon hearing this; whether it was because of the torture or the cure, Harry couldn't tell.

He still couldn't bear to think of what Snape had gone through when they'd been *cut off*. He shuddered and looked at his Potions Master, his erstwhile stepfather, unable to fully conceive of what he'd endured during his imprisonment.

"And, of course, the time Severus escaped, Peter engineered that, unbeknownst to both Severus and Krum. Then he had to put on a great show of trying to catch Severus again, as he felt that Krum was getting far too close to figuring out what he was really up to, so he captured Snape as he had before." Harry wondered if this meant he used *Tempus fugit* again. Pettigrew seemed far too fond of the spell; did he know the downside?

Harry wondered. "He really hadn't been keen on letting Krum torture Severus, but he'd felt he had no choice, or he'd be reported to his Master.

"At last, when Harry contacted him and asked for a trade, offering himself in Severus' place, Peter saw a chance for himself. He would make it possible for Harry to capture him while making it look like he was trying to ambush Harry. The reason it may have seemed just a little too easy for you to get Peter —" he started saying to his godson.

"Easy!" Harry spat, remembering the giant spiders, and the fire.

"— was because he fully intended you to capture him the entire time. He was feeling increasingly unsafe, with Voldemort's heir hanging over his shoulder all the time watching his every move, and the information he'd extracted from Snape resulting in a number of Death Eaters being hauled in. Peter knew that the whispers that he intentionally sent Voldemort to Godric's Hollow so he'd lose his powers were growing louder and louder. Finally, he reckoned that the only safe place for him was in the Ministry's custody. But if he just turned himself in, he'd still be in a great deal of danger. Voldemort's reach is not inconsiderable. Peter had to make it look like he'd been loyal to Voldemort all along, like his capture had occurred simply because he'd been out-manuevered."

Harry felt deflated. All that effort in the forest, and it had been to capture someone who *wanted* to be taken in. He felt irrationally angry, thinking about the injuries the members of the Dueling Club had sustained, how many of them could have died...

"He should have done the right thing and just turned himself in", he said between his teeth. "If we hadn't been in the forest —" Suddenly, his eyes met Ron's across the table. *Damn!* If they hadn't been in the forest, if Pettigrew hadn't been trying to make his capture look so good, Ron never would have been bitten by Lupin. Any of them could have been killed by Lupin in his werewolf form, as well. Unless... Harry remembered that Pettigrew knew about *his* golden griffin Animagus form. No — Pettigrew probably thought Harry's form was a lion. Perhaps he thought a lion would be an adequate match for a werewolf? That turned out to be right, but Harry still felt incredibly manipulated.

"And I played right into his hands", Draco Malfoy said now, his voice morose, "When I went into the forest by myself..."

Sirius shrugged. "When we were in school, James and I were the ones who did well in most of our purely magical studies, except Charms. That

was Lily's forte, in addition to Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Remus", he nodded at his friend, sitting between Hermione and Maggie, "had his strengths as well. Professor McGonagall was often rather hard on Peter, and even Flitwick became exasperated with him from time to time. But he came up with some *schemes* that were frankly quite ingenious. He always received very good marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and he concocted a number of plans for sneaking around the castle and Hogsmeade which made our school years far more interesting than they would have been otherwise, exploiting information James had found in the Restricted Section of the Library. I admit I didn't give him credit at the time; none of us did..."

Sirius looked like he might have been wondering whether being better friends with Peter, instead of merely taking advantage of his craftiness, might have saved Harry's parents. Harry eyed Draco Malfoy, whom he was both afraid to trust and afraid not to.

"He wasn't a wizard to set the world on fire, was Peter, but he was clever in his way", Sirius went on. "Scheming. And let's not forget that he also mastered the Animagus Transfiguration, although it took him rather longer than James and I..."

Katie frowned. "What do you mean *also*?"

Sirius raised his eyebrows at her, then looked at Harry. "Well, thank you for keeping my secret, Harry, but everyone might as well know now that I am an Animagus."

"You too!" Maggie exclaimed from the far end of the table. Katie was frowning. He turned to her again.

"Don't worry, my dear, I'm quite legal. Just after my name was cleared I registered properly with the Ministry and I can transfigure myself without breaking the law now. I had to pay a minor fine for doing it without supervision or permission, but now it's all squared away."

Harry looked at Katie uncomfortably; sometimes she almost seemed like she already *was* an Auror. "Just so you know — my dad was an illegal Animagus, too. His form was a stag. The three of them learned it when they were in school, so they could be with Professor Lupin during the full moon", he said, nodding at Lupin, who looked somewhat uncomfortable.

"I've told you Harry", he said now. "I'm not your professor any more. You should call me Remus."

Harry acknowledged this with a small bob of his head, but inside he felt that it should accompany the title *Uncle*, which was what he'd called Lupin in his other life, before he'd been hauled away by the Longbottoms...

Katie was starting to remind him uncomfortably of Gemma Longbottom, Neville's mother, whom he had seen more than once in his other life. He remembered the grim determination on her face on the train platform in Huntly, before he had sent her and her husband off on a wild goose chase in Inverness, and earlier, in Banff, when she and her husband had told the football team with whom he was traveling that they were Detective Chief Inspector and Detective Inspector Longbottom, Muggle titles that usually commanded a certain respect.

D.C.I. Katie Bell, he thought. He could see it in his mind's eye, he really could. She looked at him uncertainly, as if wondering whether his entire family and all of his parents' friends were hopeless lawbreakers. Her father had gone to prison, but what he did certainly wasn't premeditated or an illegal activity he'd been covering up for years.

"At any rate, he was able to clear up something else for us. We'd suspected it for some time, especially since Severus' abduction occurred when he was supposed to be meeting her in Diagon Alley... but Rita Skeeter was acting as a double agent during the entire year before that. Dumbledore asked her to work for him as an operative, but there's no love lost between him and Rita, and after he asked her, she lost no time in finding someone to put her in touch with Voldemort. Actually, she usually gave her information to Peter. He evidently filtered out some of it. For instance, he already knew what Draco was up to in trapping his father, so when *she* informed him of Draco's plan —"

"Hey!" Draco Malfoy said now, bristling with indignation that Rita Skeeter had been evidently been buzzing around him, spoiling his careful trap, in addition to Peter Pettigrew having figured it out. Harry remembered that Malfoy had been one of the first to know that Rita was an illegal Animagus; he'd been giving her information about Harry. *Serves you right*, Harry thought, even though he was lucky Pettigrew had been intercepting the information about the Lucius Malfoy plan. It was a miracle that the plan had worked at all.

"— Peter sat on the information, as he wanted Lucius out of the way as well. You know how it is: no honor among thieves. He pretended to work

with Lucius, of course, and he never told Rita he hadn't passed on her information. Everything she learned with her snooping went right to Peter. That was why so many operations were going south that year; we had a mole. I think Rita had realized that all of the suspicion was starting to fall on her when she decided to disappear. Then Peter had her contact Severus, concocting a story about having been abducted, and the next thing we knew *he* had been abducted. We think she continued to do her spying in her Animagus form —"

"A *beetle*," Harry whispered to Katie, who widened her eyes and shook her head again. He saw that Hermione was looking very tight-lipped, probably regretting that she'd ever let the reporter out of that glass jar.

"But with more strenuous security precautions we managed to thwart her; and with some well-planted false information, we also managed to send Death Eaters on a number of wild goose chases."

Hermione sat up now. "So — is *she* Daisy Furuncle?"

Sirius' eyes narrowed. "I believe she is *one* of the Daisy Furuncles."

Harry's jaw dropped. "*One* of?"

"You think we haven't been looking into this? The *Prophet* claims they have no knowledge of how it happened, but we managed to speak to a couple of *Prophet* employees using some, er, *persuasive* techniques, and they said that someone acting on behalf of Daisy Furuncle has been to their offices three times. Each time it was a woman wearing a cloak with a hood pulled up, making it difficult to see her face. The first person we talked to said it was a very tall woman with pale, freckly skin and a husky voice, and the next person said that they spoke to a very short woman with olive skin. The third person we spoke to said they talked to a medium-height woman with a high voice and pale, clear skin — no freckles — and he reckons he saw some long blond hair escaping from her hood. Given that the writing style is *alarmingly* familiar, I think our Daisy Furuncle is possibly an amalgam of more than one person. Or else 'Daisy' has some assistants. She was also planning to have an observation post a mere two houses away from Harry in Surrey, but Harry stopped it."

Now Ginny frowned. "That third woman sounds a bit like Fleur Delacour. Why would she go out of her way to smear Harry? After all, in the first article, Harry was accused of killing Roger Davies' brother, and now he's jilted Fleur for Alicia. Why would she go on the offensive for someone who'd been cheating on her like that?"

"Perhaps she didn't know yet. She may have thought she was supporting her boyfriend and his family in their time of grief, pointing a finger at Evan's murderer. If, that is, the woman was Fleur. I'm not ruling her out. We haven't a clue who the other women might be, unless it was actually Rita each time, and she'd taken potion to make herself to look like someone else. And, for that matter, we don't actually have any proof that Rita *is* involved with the articles — just a very, very strong suspicion." Harry tried to think of three women besides Rita who had it in for him, and came up dry.

"Well", Hermione reasoned, "even if Fleur was involved, she probably couldn't have written the articles herself. The last time I ran into her during a Hogsmeade weekend, her English was only a little better than when she first arrived here for the Tournament."

Sirius nodded. "Right. However, as much as I'd like to go on speculating about this, we have to move on. Needless to say, we all need to be very, very careful of what we say at all times. Do as much communication as possible in writing, with the parchment charmed so that only you and the person who is to receive it can read it. I went round the entire castle last night and early this morning casting revealing spells, looking for any *beetles* or magical listening devices. I turned up these."

He put his hand in his pocket and then withdrew it, his fist closed. When he opened it, they could all see three innocuous-looking black marbles. Then Harry remembered the marble that Pettigrew sent in the letter about Malfoy being in the forest; he was able to hold it and see what was going on in the depths of the Forbidden Forest, where there was another marble, its mate. "I took all of the magicks off them and painted them black for good measure", Sirius said gravely, "but I want to make another sweep through the castle today, to catch any others. There were a lot of people here yesterday; it was inevitable, I suppose, that someone would try to use the party to infiltrate the castle. What infuriates me", and Harry had only seen him angrier on rare occasions, "is that one of these was in *my niece's bedroom*. When these *people* — and I use the term loosely — start invading the privacy of a *seven-year-old* I just can't —" He sputtered into silence, furious.

Harry looked at Katie, next to him. She swallowed.

"I'm staying in Mercy's room", she said quietly. "It was probably planted there to spy on me."

Sirius put the marbles away again. "Nevertheless. I took the precaution of thoroughly combing through *this* room before breakfast this morning, and while I am fairly certain it is safe in here, I advise all of you to watch what you say in the rest of the castle." He nodded at Lupin and Snape. "Remus, Severus — can you help me make another sweep after we're done here?" They both agreed, and Sirius moved on.

"Now — Peter didn't just discuss his recent activities. He talked about why he became a Death Eater in the first place. He wanted me to understand, he said. He also begged us not to give him Veritaserum." He sighed, looked conflicted about this. "He said there were still some things that he didn't want to reveal, in case of Death Eaters infiltrating the Ministry. He said that everything he was planning to tell us was the truth, but there were some bits of the truth he didn't feel comfortable telling yet. If he was under the potion's influence, he wouldn't be able to help himself; if we asked him a question, he would be compelled to answer truthfully. So help me, I agreed to it and he told us this of his own free will. I do hope it is the truth.

"He said that he went to Hogwarts for a Quidditch match in November, after our seventh year. Remus was going as well; they were going to meet in Hogsmeade and then walk to the castle together for the match. Do you remember this, Remus?"

Remus Lupin looked more uncomfortable than Harry had ever seen him. "Yes. Yes I do", he said quietly, and for some reason he glanced at Maggie, with a distinctly guilty look on his face. When he looked at Charlie, he brightened. "We'd heard that Gryffindor had a brilliant new Seeker who would make up for the fact that James wasn't playing Chaser any more", he said slyly. While Charlie turned pink under his freckles, Sirius continued.

"Peter said that Arthur Weasley was there as well, that he'd brought his daughters to see their brother Charlie play. Is that right?" he asked, nodding now at Bill and Charlie. Oddly, Bill and Charlie responded as Remus had, with guilt clearly written on both of their faces. They looked at each other briefly, then at Sirius.

"Yeah, that's right", Bill said, answering for both of them. "I was a fourth year and Charlie was a second year. He had just made the team. Mum and Dad — Dad especially — were both over the moon that he was the new Seeker. Mum didn't come, though. She was rather busy with Percy

and the twins and couldn't get a baby-sitter. Perce was two and the twins were six months old."

"Yes. So your father traveled by Floo to Hogsmeade with the girls and went up to the castle with them, right?" Bill and Charlie both nodded. Harry frowned, wondering where this was going. *They weren't kidnapped until the following spring. Did Pettigrew start planning the kidnapping the previous November?*

"Can you tell us what happened that day, after the match?" Sirius said to the oldest Weasley brothers. Charlie looked at Bill and nodded; Bill looked round at them all — except, it seemed, for Maggie — and launched into the story.

"Dad and Peggy and Annie were going to stay for lunch. The match had started soon after breakfast, but Charlie caught the Snitch so quickly it didn't last long." He elbowed his brother; Charlie gave them all a lop-sided smile. "We showed the girls around the grounds a bit, then went back up to the castle for lunch. When we were in the entrance hall —" He paused, and finally looked at his long-lost sister. Nobody said a word, not even *What?* They waited for Bill to continue.

"Trelawney was there", he choked out at last. "When Peggy came in the doors she crouched down to talk to her. We couldn't hear what she was saying too well..."

"She said", Maggie spoke up suddenly, staring into space, as though that was helping her remember, *"I could feel that you were here."*

Harry shivered and felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. *He* could feel something coming, something important.

"And then —" Charlie started to say, but Bill jumped in.

"Trelawney, um started talking in this strange, deep voice", he said, with a nervous glance at Charlie, Maggie and Remus. They were all frowning at Bill.

Sirius nodded. "She gave the Prophecy."

Bill looked at him, the shock clear on his face. Maggie, Charlie and Remus looked suprised as well, and Charlie started to say, "No, it was —" but his brother had put an elbow in his ribs — and not in a friendly way, as before.

"Is that what Pettigrew told you?" Bill asked Sirius, looking very white.

"Yes", Sirius said; it seemed to Harry that he was trying his best to look calm and unruffled, while he was actually waiting very tensely.

"Yes", Bill echoed him, his voice shaking. "Trelawney gave the Prophecy."

What was wrong with them? Harry wondered. *All* of them. In the back of his mind, he had always assumed that it was Trelawney. Dumbledore had said she'd given one correct prophecy before predicting that Peter would return to Voldemort, at the end of Harry's third year.

"I tried to remember it and write it down later", Bill went on, his voice more stable now. "I didn't get it all, though, and I had to use some memory-enhancing potion to remember the rest."

"Who else was present when she did this?" Sirius wanted to know.

"Let's see — Annie was there. And Peggy — I mean, Maggie. Then Charlie, Lupin and Pettigrew."

"That's all?" Sirius said, his eyebrows raised.

"It — it was early for lunch; there weren't a lot of people around yet. I was surprised to see Trelawney out of her tower at all. It seemed she'd come down just to look for Peggy." Large drops of sweat stood out on Bill's forehead, and he wiped them off with a handkerchief.

Sirius had put the tips of his fingers together and was staring over them. "What did you do later, Bill? With the words of the Prophecy you'd written down?"

He looked guilty again. "I — I tried to figure out what they might mean, but I couldn't make head or tail of it. So I — I decided to go into the forest, to ask a Centaur I'd heard about who wasn't as bad as the others about hating humans. I hoped he might help me."

"Did you tell anyone you were going to do this?"

Bill frowned. "I — I don't think so —"

Charlie sat up. "Yeah, you did. You said to me, 'I'll bet one of the Centaurs could tell me what all this means'."

Bill squinted, as though that would help him to better see the past. It was almost twenty years earlier. "I said that out loud?" he said wonderingly.

"Where were you?" Sirius asked him.

"We were in the entrance hall; it was just after — after we all heard the Prophecy", Charlie said, with a conspiratorial glance at his older brother.

"Was Peter still there, or had he already left?"

Bill opened his eyes wide. "Yeah, I think he might have been there still —"

Sirius nodded. "That's what he told us." He looked at Remus Lupin. "Did he return to Hogsmeade with you?"

Lupin looked thoughtful; he was surveying the Weasley brothers and their sister Maggie as though trying to decide something. "No — he said he wanted to stay and visit with McGonagall. I found that unlikely, as she'd been pretty hard on him in school, but I had to go, as the moon would be rising full that night just as the sun set, and I didn't want to risk being stuck in the midst of traveling when that happened..."

"Peter said that he stayed at the castle in his rat form. He managed to infiltrate Gryffindor Tower, finding a way into the dorms that only a small rodent could. He hung about the fourth-year dorm that entire winter, listening for any sign from Bill that he would be going into the forest to consult the Centaur."

Lupin's eyes lit up. "That's when Peter disappeared for months! We thought something terrible had happened to him!"

"No, nothing terrible. He was just hanging about Bill here, waiting. He also managed to get a copy of the Prophecy for himself; he copied it out of the notebook where Bill had written it. He said he didn't fancy being the one to ask the Centaurs to interpret it, but if the summer term ended without Bill going into the forest, he would take it upon himself."

Bill looked thoughtful again. "I remember now... Booth had noticed the rat. One of the other lads in my year. Peregrin Booth. It was hiding in his wardrobe. He made a sort of pet out of it, bringing it scraps of food from the Great Hall and letting it sleep on an old pair of corduroy trousers. Did Pettigrew say why he was so interested in the Prophecy in the first place?" This jolted Harry. Another question was, why was *Bill* so interested in the Prophecy?

"*That*", Sirius said, "is one of the things he said he wasn't ready to reveal." He sighed deeply and went on. "Peter said you finally went to the forest in the spring."

Bill nodded, looking around guiltily. "Yeah. The Centaur wasn't really all that helpful. I don't even remember much of the Prophecy now. I lost the notebook where I wrote it down. Then when Peggy and Annie disappeared — nothing else seemed particularly important." His voice had gone very soft.

"I couldn't figure out the first part of the Prophecy at all, and when I finally found Firenze, what he had to say didn't make it any clearer. He said he'd seen things in the stars, and in the scry. All I remember is that the Dark Lord was going to fall twice, and both times he'd be defeated by a triangle made up of a Lion, a Moonchild and a Daughter of War. And the Lion and the Moonchild both loved the Daughter of War. Oh, and she was called 'flame-haired', too. Then he was throwing numbers around, something about what he'd seen in the stars. He said the Lion's number was eleven. The Moonchild's number was five. And one of the Lions wasn't born yet. One of the Moonchildren wasn't born yet either. I asked him what the number of the Daughter of War was, and he said the two have different numbers. The first triangle makes only half of a whole, but the second triangle makes one. And he said the number of the six people together is six. That seemed kind of obvious to me — six people make six. It was like he was just repeating himself.

"I didn't know what to think, and I'd just about given up, when he looked right at me and told me that there would be a lot of people from my family who would fight the Dark Lord. He said my youngest brother would march by the side of the Lion, and that his number was also eleven. At the time I thought he meant Fred." He looked at Ron now, and Ron met his eyes for a second before looking at Harry. *March at the side of the Lion...*

"Then", Bill went on, "he told me that a Daughter of War would come from my family. I asked him to tell me who it was, but he became distracted, staring at the stars again, and then he left. I didn't understand whether he was saying it was Peggy or Annie or one of each of them —" He took a deep breath, and now he put one large hand up to his face, and Harry could see tears seeping through his fingers. "I didn't tell anyone about what he'd said", his voice came through his hand, "and then, a few weeks later —"

Harry saw Hermione cover her mouth with her hand; a few weeks later the girls were abducted and disappeared, seemingly forever. Then he looked at Ginny; she was weeping silently, her head on Ron's shoulder while he had his arm around her; Harry saw that Ron's eyes were wet now too. Suddenly, Maggie rose and walked around the table and sat down next to Bill. She put her arms around him and pulled him close and he wept into his sister's neck. Harry felt more than a little uncomfortable at seeing a man in his thirties crying openly, a man almost as old as his parents would

have been, had they lived. Watching Snape in the Pensieve weeping over his mother (and doing the same thing when Harry had traveled through time) was different. Snape hadn't *known* he had an audience, and Harry had felt both experiences were a little unreal. This was all too real.

"*I'm so sorry —*" he sobbed as he held his sister. "*I didn't know —*"

"Bill", Sirius said quietly, but he managed to get his attention. "What you didn't know was — Peter was in the forest, listening to your meeting with Firenze. He heard everything. After that, your friend found that his pet rat had gone missing, didn't he?"

Bill dried his tears and turned to face Sirius again. "Right. Booth just reckoned someone's cat had gotten it. Actually, he got into a great row with one of my best friends about it. Alex — he had a large grey cat."

Ron and Hermione exchanged a glance, both looking guilty, and Harry remembered the Scabbers Controversy. Pettigrew had done this before.

"Right", Sirius said, echoing Bill. "Pettigrew had his information — or, at least as much as you — and he ran off. Now, I'm not entirely sure the next part is strictly true, but what he told *us* is that he was in a wizarding pub in Norfolk when it was attacked by Death Eaters, who just started putting Cruciatus on people for sport." They were all focused on Sirius again, giving Bill and Maggie a modicum of privacy.

"Peter was always the most squeamish one about the pain that comes with the Animagus Transfiguration — even though he eventually became used to it — and he wasn't really interested in finding out what Cruciatus was like. He couldn't just transform into a rat and run off — someone would see him. So he told one of the Death Eaters that he had some information about a Prophecy predicting the Dark Lord's fall, but he would only give the information to Voldemort directly. He was just interested in saving himself from a bit of pain, and the next thing he knew he was being initiated as a Death Eater." Harry winced and he saw that Draco Malfoy did too; they both knew that being initiated involved a great deal of pain (although Malfoy didn't know that Harry knew from first-hand experience).

"He didn't realize what would happen once he started trying to negotiate with Voldemort or his underlings. You don't just offer up information to Voldemort or a Death Eater to save your skin and then walk away. He was stuck. He gave what information he had. He had heard the Centaur tell Bill that a Daughter of War would come from his family. It

was the most concrete thing he had. They asked him what he knew about the Weasleys, whether they had any daughters, and he confirmed that they had two. But he said he didn't know which one was the Daughter of War. It turned out Voldemort didn't care. He gave him his first assignment as a Death Eater: dispose of the Weasley sisters."

Harry was horrified, then remembered that Voldemort himself had tried to kill him when he was a baby, far younger than seven and nine. He knew he should stop being surprised by anything he or his Death Eaters would do.

"Peter wasn't really hardened yet by the life of a dark wizard. He was scared. The idea of killing two little girls sickened him. Some of Voldemort's top people taught him the spell he used to abduct them; the *Tempus fugit* spell. It was meant to be a way for him to kill them and then disappear quickly. Peter didn't have his Apparition test yet. Instead, he took the girls away to the nearest city, turned them over to Muggles, erased their memories, and he made them owl-proof."

Harry thought he must have let his mind wander until he heard the last two words. "Owl-proof?"

"Yes. He put a spell on them so that they would be undetectable to owls. Sort of like making a building unplotable. But in this case, it means the person can't be sent post-owls. They tried finding the girls using owls, but they always kept coming back. That's what usually happens when you try to send owl post to someone who's dead."

They were all silent now. Bill and Maggie leaned on one another silently, and Harry saw how Snape's eyes followed her, looking haunted.

"His story of having disposed of the girls wasn't trusted by his new Master until they tried sending owl post and it came back. Then they believed him. But just in case disposing of the Weasley girls had only removed one Daughter of War and not two, Voldemort set Peter to work trying to figure out the rest of the Prophecy."

Harry sat up, hopeful. Did Pettigrew actually understand the Prophecy? "However — Peter was afraid that if he identified any more people in the Prophecy, he'd be sent on more assignments to kill those involved. He dawdled for months, pretending to be traveling around doing research. Months stretched into a year, and Peter still hadn't produced anything. Voldemort was getting impatient. Peter went into hiding; the only place he could think of to go, he said, was the Burrow. He said he remembered how

cozy and homely it was when he'd been hanging about there, trying to work out what to do about the girls. Also, he said he felt terrible about what he'd done to the Weasleys and wanted to make sure they were all right." Harry saw Ron's mouth twisting unpleasantly, clearly doubting this.

"He started living in their garden in his rat form, using the tunnels that the gnomes had built. In the spring of 1980, Percy found him. How old was he then?"

"He would have been about three-and-a-half", Charlie said. "I was fourteen."

"Well, Percy made a pet of him, in a way. Rather like your old dorm mate, Bill. In his rat form, Peter seemed to have a talent for making friends with little boys who were a bit on the fringes. But then he noticed that your mum was expecting another baby soon and panicked. What if it was a girl? That would mean he might have taken the wrong Daughter of War. But then Ron was born, and he breathed easy again.

"Peter felt the Weasleys were safe, since they hadn't had another daughter, and he'd grown tired of living as a rat, so he left the Burrow. He turned up at Lily's and James' place in Cardiff and found that Lily was also expecting a baby. He hadn't realized she was pregnant. He stayed with them for over two months and he was there when she went into labor. He helped James get her to a Muggle hospital — Lily was never completely comfortable with wizarding medicine — and Harry was born. She later told me how helpful Peter had been during her labor, how he'd held her hand when James had gone to get her ice chips, how he'd talked to her to keep her mind off the pain. She refused to take anything to be more comfortable, of course. That was Lily.

"We all turned up the next day to see the baby, of course." Sirius smiled at Harry. "He was the spitting image of James. His eyes still looked blue, though, so we couldn't see yet that he had some of Lily in him, too. We had a good time visiting, and got a bit raucous. I think the matron was about to kick us out, when Lily said something that made Peter turn white as a sheet.

"When Peter told me — I remembered. But at the time, it didn't seem significant at all." He paused, glancing again at Harry. "She'd taken Arithmancy in school and she said she'd worked out your Arithmancy numbers. Said they were good ones. She said your birth number was eleven — and when she did, Peter clutched at the bed. He said that then he

realized that you'd been born under the sign of Leo", he nodded at Harry, "and that made you a Lion whose number was eleven. And you hadn't been born when the Prophecy was given.

"After he left the hospital, he went back to James' and Lily's flat. He said he hadn't taken Arithmancy and didn't understand what Lily had done to get the number eleven, but at the flat he found her old Arithmancy text and quickly worked it out. It's just about the first thing you learn in Arithmancy: add up the numbers in the person's birthday to get their birth number. The numbers in Harry's birthday are three, one, seven, another one, nine and eight. That totals twenty-nine. After that you're supposed to add the digits of the total, and adding two and nine gets you eleven. Simple, really.

"He worried now that someone would find out that Harry fit the description in the Prophecy. But on the other hand, he decided that he had some information he could offer Voldemort if he was run to ground again by Death Eaters. He had his Apparition test by now and his Dark Mark had hurt him more than once, but he hadn't gone when summoned. He was afraid it was just a matter of time before he was found and chastised for not being a faithful servant. He'd never intended to be a servant to begin with, he said. And now he had to keep running in place just to keep Voldemort from deciding to kill him.

"He worked out the other dates in 1979 and 1980 that would give a birth number of eleven to someone born under the sign of Leo. In 1979 the dates included —" Sirius took a piece of parchment out of his robe pocket and consulted it. "July 23, and August 4 and 13. He checked old copies of the *Daily Prophet* for birth announcements, and only one of those days had a wizarding birth — August 4, a girl. She didn't qualify — it was clear from the Prophecy that the Lions were boys. He did the work for 1980 then. In addition to July 31 — Harry's birthdate — other dates that worked out were August 3 and 12. But no wizards were born on those days. At least not in the wizarding world; if the Lion was going to be a Muggle-born wizard, Peter had no way of knowing. That information was kept under lock and key at Hogwarts, waiting for the day when those students needed to receive their school acceptance letters.

"Then it occurred to him to try to work out the Moonchild — if that meant someone born under the sign of Cancer, as he thought it did. It would give him more to hand over if the Death Eaters caught up with him.

It could be, of course, that the Moonchild *still* hadn't been born, but he worked out that if the Moonchild was born in 1979, and his number was five, possible birthdates were —" he looked at the parchment again, "— June 27 and July 8 and 17. If the Moonchild's birthyear was 1980, the dates were June 26 and July 7 and 16. He also worked out possible dates for 1981 and the next ten years." Harry turned and looked at Draco, who swallowed. "Of the dates that had already passed, only July 7, 1980 coincided with the date of a wizard's birth", Sirius said, looking hard at Draco. "Peter didn't know your parents at all. He had no compunctions about selling you to Voldemort to save his skin, if he found himself in a tight spot. In fact, you were his back-up plan. Should any Death Eaters corner him, his strategy was going to be to send them to Lucius Malfoy's house."

Harry looked to see what Draco Malfoy's reaction to this was; oddly enough, he was glaring at Ron. "I always knew I didn't like that damn rat of yours", he said through his teeth.

"And I always knew he had *some* good points", Ron said back testily. "Turns out his biting Goyle that time wasn't the only good taste he showed. He was willing to give up *you*."

"Ron!" Ginny said now, sitting up and pulling away from her brother. "Draco was just a *baby*! And Pettigrew was willing to have him killed just to save his own skin!"

"And mine", Harry said quietly. He looked up at her. She bit her lip and looked back at him uncertainly, her eyes wide. Draco was sitting to his right and she looked across at the two of them, her eyes going back and forth; he'd never seen anyone who looked so conflicted.

"Right", Sirius said yet again, clearly intent on moving on. "Anyway, soon after Harry was born, James started playing Quidditch again. He was away a lot, and Peter stayed with Lily to keep her company while he was gone.

"Peter actually lived a pretty peaceful life for a while; he found a flat in Cardiff near Lily and James and Harry, and he continued to help Lily with the shopping and sometimes baby-sitting Harry — until the following summer, when some Death Eaters found him doing the shopping in Cardiff Market. They hauled him off and did some — things — to punish him for not paying attention to his duties. That's when he gave up Draco's name. Said he was the Moonchild in the Prophecy. Voldemort didn't trust Peter

completely, though, so he had a reading done on the child, and sure enough — everything pointed to his contributing to Voldemort's fall. It seemed clear that that was his destiny. Presumably, that's when Lucius Malfoy made the deal to protect his son.

"Even though he'd been right about the Moonchild, Peter was kept under close watch after that, however, and when it seemed he wasn't making an effort to continue to interpret the Prophecy, he was `persuaded' to again give up some information. He found out what Malfoy had done, and thought that maybe it wouldn't be so bad if James and Lily did the same, to save Harry. When he told Voldemort that Harry was the Lion, he also claimed that he was close to Lily and James and could convince them to raise Harry as Voldemort's servant.

"Of course, it didn't work out that way."

"Lily and James would never agree to such a thing!" Remus Lupin exclaimed indignantly, breaking his silence. Harry swallowed, shrinking inside, remembering how he'd induced his mother to do something so against her nature...

Severus Snape nodded in agreement. "When he was holding me prisoner, he told me some of this. He said that the Dark Lord didn't want them knowing that he was a Death Eater. He didn't want anyone knowing — he was more useful that way. I certainly didn't know. I always thought *you* —" he nodded at Sirius — "had betrayed Lily and James." He had a small, rueful smile, and Harry realized that he and Sirius had buried the hatchet for good; they were inarguably fighting on the same side now, comrades. He remembered the way Sirius had been joking about Harry ruining his broom saving Snape; it had been entirely good-natured, and Snape hadn't really seemed to mind.

"I received instructions to go speak to her", Snape continued, "because of a — prior relationship we'd had —" His voice had grown soft, and Harry saw that both Katie and Ginny looked shocked. "But that's when — when I knew I could no longer do his bidding. I hadn't been asked to do much since Lucius Malfoy recruited me..." he nodded at Draco, who went whiter than usual. "All I'd really done was to cultivate Barty Crouch, Jr., who was just one year out of school. I didn't think much of that; he was young and rebellious, hated his father with a passion. I thought he was simply trying to find a way to get under his father's skin. But now — now I was supposed to convince Lily — of all people — to raise her son to be a

loyal Death Eater. I —" He paused, looking very grim. "I went to Albus Dumbledore and threw myself on his mercy. I didn't tell him about Crouch. Now I wish I had, of course." He met Harry's eyes for a moment; Harry tried to show that he forgave him this, but he wasn't certain whether Snape understood. Snape's voice grew stronger again.

"I went to the place in the country where they had moved — James' parents had owned it. I tried to talk to Lily, I went through the motions of asking her to agree to raise Harry as the Dark Lord's servant, save his life, as well as her life and James' life. She refused, of course. I was half-relieved and half frustrated as hell that she was so stubbornly brave. We had a bit of a row and she kicked me out."

"Right", Sirius said, going on, "And sometime before that, Lucius Malfoy had already approached your dad", he said to Katie, "since he worked with her as an Auror. He refused to try to convince her to raise Harry as Voldemort's servant. Malfoy started to get desperate; he felt that it was important to save all of the children in the Prophecy, or Voldemort might think they were all expendable. Lucius put Sam under Imperius. He resisted it. So he put your mum under Imperius", he said to Katie; "tried to get *her* to convince your dad to talk to Lily —"

He stopped. Harry looked at Katie, who broke down now, tears streaming down her face. Harry gathered her to him as she cried into his shoulder; she clutched at him and his heart ached. So many lives cut short or ruined...

While he held her, Harry saw that Ron, Ginny and Hermione looked somewhat embarrassed. Sirius waited until the noise from Katie's sobs subsided somewhat. Draco Malfoy was looking rather uncomfortable, hearing what his father had done to safeguard his son. Sam had told him, but it was possible he'd only thought about this in terms of how it had affected Sam, who'd gone to prison, rather than how it had affected Katie, who'd grown up without her parents.

"While she was under the Imperius Curse", Sirius went on, "Katie's mother tried to convince Katie's father to speak to Lily, but he still refused. So she put Cruciatus on Katie to try to coerce him —"

Hermione gasped. "How old were you?"

Katie lifted her head from Harry's shoulder; her eyes were red and swollen. "I was two-and-a-half", she said softly.

Sirius drew his lips into a line. "So Sam disarmed his wife, but the Disarming Charm made her fly out a window and down four or five flights onto a solid brick terrace. Sam didn't contest the charges — he went to prison for ten years for casting a spell that resulted in another person's death."

Katie took the handkerchief that Harry offered her and wiped her face. When she had collected herself again she leaned on his shoulder once more and he wrapped his arms around her protectively. He rocked her slightly, kissing her brow, not caring that they were in a room full of people.

Sirius cleared his throat. "Erm. Well. There's really not much more to add. Once Voldemort realized that nothing was going to change James and Lily's minds, he decided the safest thing to do would be to eliminate Harry."

"I told Albus that Harry was marked for death", Snape said. Harry looked at him, no longer seeing his Potions Master, who rarely used his first name, but his stepfather, who had rarely called him by his last name (only in Dark Arts). "Albus met with them and convinced them to use the Fidelius Charm to hide."

"Voldemort learned that Dumbledore knew he was targeting Harry", Sirius said quietly. "He had a number of people watching his movements. As you all know, Dumbledore was the only wizard he really feared. Needless to say, Voldemort wasn't completely convinced that Peter was a sincere servant. He knew Peter had once been Lily's and James' close friend. So Voldemort had Lucius Malfoy spread the rumor that the Potters had a friend who was a traitor, to sow dissent in the ranks. Malfoy was evidently the only one who knew Peter was that traitor."

"James and Lily called me and Peter to Godric's Hollow to discuss the plan. They didn't contact Remus..." He paused, looking at his friend uncomfortably.

"Because they assumed *I* was the traitor", Remus Lupin said quietly. "As a werewolf, I was highly suspect already. A large number of werewolves were throwing in their lot with Voldemort. That was well known. To throw suspicion off him — not that I think it was ever on him — Peter suggested I was the traitor, and Sirius believed I was the traitor as well."

Sirius' mouth was a straight line again. "Remus was in contact with the four of us only sporadically, and when he was, he behaved in a rather dodgy way; he seemed to be hiding something..."

At that point, Remus Lupin blushed deeply. "Yes. Well, I *was* hiding something." He took a deep breath; he had a now-or-never look on his face. "I hadn't told anyone yet that I — I was seeing a young man from Dublin... I didn't know how anyone would respond to that. So I hedged about who I'd been spending time with and I'm sure it just wound up sounding like I was covering up my Death Eater activities."

Harry noticed that Snape, while he looked surprised, did not look *very* surprised. Harry also remembered that Lupin had said he only started coming to terms with being bisexual after he was out of school. Of course, his friends — knowing there was a traitor in their midst — would all distrust him if he seemed to be lying every time he was asked who he'd been with... And so many other werewolves were followers of Voldemort...

Sirius went on: "Peter claimed that he really did think Lily and James would be safest if he was the Secret Keeper. He maintains that he didn't do it to give them up to Voldemort; he assumed that everyone would think it was me and that they'd come after me. If I really had been the Secret Keeper, I might have cracked under the pressure of torture. Or so Peter claimed. However, he hadn't thought it out very well; he hadn't figured out that the reason for there being a rumor that one of James and Lily's friends was a traitor was that Lucius Malfoy had started it, on orders from Voldemort himself, since he didn't fully trust Peter. On a hunch, he had some Death Eaters haul in Peter and started torturing him. Peter very soon gave up the information about where Lily and James were. That's when he begged Voldemort to spare Lily.

"Yes", Harry said softly, "Voldemort told her to step aside when he was trying to kill me. I — I heard it when I was in third year, when the dementors were too close to me..." He was still holding Katie, but suddenly, it seemed more like *she* was holding *him*. She had her head on his shoulder and she lifted it for a second and kissed him gently on the cheek.

Sirius looked like he was remembering living with the dementors, his eyes wide and dark. Then he shook himself, coming back to the present. "Interesting. He must have thought there was some use to which she could

be put. She was an Auror, after all. I doubt he would have spared her merely to please Peter." Harry thought there was still a haunted look about him, despite his matter-of-fact words.

They were all silent. Harry looked up and saw Hermione staring into space, frowning. He could practically see the wheels spinning in her head. "What are you thinking about, Hermione?" he asked her quietly.

Her frown deepened. "I was trying to work out the numbers for the Triangles. I don't understand it at all, and I got 170\% on my last Arithmancy examination at the end of the term!" She sounded very frustrated. "One thing I *do* understand — if the second triangle makes a whole, that means its number totals nine. That's the number of wholeness and completion in Arithmancy. If you take eleven and five, which are *your* numbers", she said to Harry and Draco, "that makes sixteen. Adding the one and six gets you seven. So that means the Daughter of War has to have a number of two or eleven for the total to be nine."

Harry frowned. "I know I'll regret asking this, but why is my number eleven instead of two if you're supposed to reduce everything to one-digit numbers?"

"Oh, you never reduce eleven or twenty-two. They're very special numbers. You see —"

Sirius cleared his throat. "Perhaps you can continue this at another time, Harry and Hermione. I think that's all that needs to be discussed right now. Remus and Severus were going to help me comb the house for more Third Eyes", he said, referring to the black-painted marbles he'd shown them earlier.

"I'll help", Katie said shakily, still calming down after her cry. "Good practice."

They all looked baffled, so Harry nudged her and whispered, "*Tell them.*"

Blushing prettily, she confessed, "I've passed the screening tests and I'm going to start Auror training in September."

"*That* explains it", Draco Malfoy said, visibly moving away from her.

"What?" she wanted to know, bristling.

"It explains why you already sound like a cop."

Sirius laughed; Harry forgot how handsome he looked when he laughed. It seemed that Katie was noticing, too. "Don't try to change", he

said to Katie. "If you're anything like your dad, I know you'll be good at it. Congratulations."

"I can help with the sweep, too", Ron said. "And then we need to do our training", he added, to Lupin.

"We can help as well", Bill said, including Charlie in this.

"Can I try?" Maggie asked uncertainly. "Or — can I at least watch?"

Snape looked at Sirius. "It would be educational, Sirius", he said evenly. Somehow Harry thought that wasn't the only reason he wanted to include Maggie. Sirius nodded.

"My parents have gone out visiting friends for the day and Cass, Floyd and Alan are at their jobs; Ursula has taken the children to Diagon Alley to get the things Orion will need for Hogwarts in September. I'll handle Cass and Floyd's room; they're very particular about their personal things not being disturbed. Whoever takes Orion's and Leo's room — watch out for traps."

"We can take that", Bill said, referring to him and Charlie. "We're used to that, from the twins."

Harry looked at Draco. "What do you reckon — a good time to catch up on some running?" He turned to Ginny and Hermione. "The four of us could use the track around the loch."

Malfoy and the girls agreed, and after they all changed clothes, they went down to the dungeons and walked through the tunnel to reach the cottage where the cars were parked. Sirius had given him the password for the door (which had to be used coming and going) and soon they were all running by the shores of Loch Ascog, the mid-day sun overhead. They'd brought small bottles of water, and when they paused at the half-way point around the loch to drink, Harry looked back at the `castle'. He hoped the others were making it safe; he hated to think of the Blacks' home being less private because of him.

As they relaxed on the shore, Sandy hissed to Harry, "*The Daughter is three.*"

"Hmm?" he answered her sleepily. She repeated herself. He sat bolt upright.

"*What did you say?*"

"Must I repeat it again?"

"No, no. Sorry, Sandy. How do you — is something going to happen that —?" He stopped, unsure whether he even wanted to know. He tensed

up though, his time of relaxation evidently at an end.

He stared with trepidation at the loch. Some fishermen had driven a Range Rover up to the shore and were wearing tall boots like the ones in the castle's entrance hall, standing in the water, fly-fishing, speaking laconically to one another. Harry heard one of them talking about the castle ruins. He tried not to smile too much; if only they knew that it was a rather tall tower house with ten people living in it. Wait, he thought: eleven. I'm the eleventh.

He was about to point out to Hermione that this was another eleven and tell her what Sandy had said about the Daughter, but Hermione said suddenly to Ginny, "Ginny, do you remember your oldest sister's birthday?"

Ginny immediately answered, "The first of September, nineteen-sev —"

"Right, right", Hermione said impatiently, staring into space again.

Harry watched her face as she thought about this. Suddenly her eyes went wide and she sprang to her feet. Harry pulled himself up next to her.

"What's wrong, Hermione?"

She whirled on him, grabbing his arms. "Harry!" she said, her eyes very bright. "Would you say you love the Weasleys?"

Harry looked back at her awkwardly, then saw Ginny looking at him. "What — what do you mean?"

"I mean — would you say you love the Weasley family? The whole thing. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Maggie —"

He pulled his eyes away from Ginny again and frowned at Hermione. "Well — sure. I guess you could say that. Fine. I love the Weasleys. They're great."

"Right!" she said excitedly, then turned to Draco. "Draco — you love Ginny, right?"

He looked at his girlfriend. "Right. Granger, what are you —"

"And by extension, would you say that you love her family? You know, for her sake?"

He frowned now. "Some of her brothers I could do without —"

"But what about Maggie? Would you say you love her? You know, like a sister, as she's Ginny's sister and all?"

He looked completely baffled by her manic questions. "Sure. I reckon." He backed up from her a little. "Perhaps we should get you inside,

Granger. I think you've been out in the sun too long."

Secretly, Harry agreed, although he didn't dare say anything. "So — if we manage to find Ginny's oldest sister, you'll love her too? As another one of Ginny's sisters?"

He shrugged. "Why not?"

She turned to Harry, who said, "Of course. But first we have to —"

"*We have to find Annie Weasley!*" Hermione declared, interrupting him. He and Draco and Ginny all stared at each other, fearing for Hermione's sanity.

"Yeah, only I don't think you can actually make a living stating the obvious, Granger, so maybe during your seventh year you might want to focus on something a little more useful..."

"No, no, no!" she practically crowed with delight now. "You don't understand. *Annie is the Daughter of War!* She's flame-haired. She comes from the Weasley family. You're both supposed to love her. And she was born at the beginning of Voldemort's reign of terror, making her a *Daughter of War!* Plus —" She paused for effect, watching their faces.

"Well?" Harry finally said. He couldn't take waiting anymore.

"Her number is *eleven*. Adding that to your eleven makes twenty-two, and adding Draco's five makes twenty-seven. That reduces to nine. *Nine!* To defeat Voldemort, you need *Annie Weasley!*"

She was practically dancing with glee. She started running along the shore again, calling over her shoulder, "Let's tell the others!" Since she had a head start, Harry, Ginny and Draco had to work to catch her up. As Malfoy ran next Harry, he muttered out of the corner of his mouth, "No wonder you broke up with her, Potter. She's *mental*." Harry turned his head briefly and glared at him.

"Sod off, Malfoy", he said between gritted teeth, mentally saying something far worse. Then he put on a burst of speed and caught up with Hermione, running by her side the rest of the way back to the cottage. Was Hermione right? Was the Daughter's number eleven, like his? Why had Sandy said *three*? Then, as they reached the cottage, Mercy came out to greet them, grinning.

Oh, Harry thought. *I should have known*. Trust Sandy. *That's* what she was talking about. Mercy's the daughter in her family, and the third child. And here she is...

So. That meant —

Annie Weasley was the Daughter of War.

He greeted Mercy and they listened to her chatter for a few minutes about what she and her mother and brothers had done in Diagon Alley that morning, but her words didn't really register in Harry's head. Instead, he found himself surreptitiously eyeing Draco Malfoy, who was laughing with the rest of them over Mercy's exaggerations and convoluted stories.

Now if only I can stand one more minute of being in Draco Malfoy's company, he thought. If he's necessary for Voldmort to be defeated — I just need to make sure I don't kill him first.

* * *

When they were back in the castle proper, Hermione raced into the sitting room ahead of the other three and breathlessly told Sirius what she'd already told Harry, Ginny and Draco. He sat up, looking very interested; he'd been lounging by the cold fireplace in the sitting room, reading the *Daily Prophet*. Harry assumed that the search for Third Eyes was over. Snape, Maggie, Bill and Charlie seemed to have left. Ron and Lupin were nowhere in sight; probably doing werewolf things, Harry assumed. Mercy had gone into the kitchen to have lunch with her mother and brothers.

"That does sound like she's the one... I suppose Bill's instincts were right on. We don't have to discuss all of this now. I understand that when Maggie's adoptive parents return, she's going to talk to them about whatever agency they used to adopt her, and hopefully we can start tracing what happened to her sister. A pity Peter made them owl-proof..."

Harry started to leave, then stopped. "Wait — Pigwidgeon came to the house in Appleby Magna. Maybe she's not owl-proof any more."

"The owl didn't come to her, Harry", Hermione reminded him. "Pig came to Ron."

His face fell. "Oh. Right."

Sirius waved them off. "Don't worry about it now. We have plenty of other things to worry about. As it is, we found *fourteen* Third Eyes in various hiding places around the house. I've destroyed them all, but it's damned frustrating. I wish I could feel confident that we've gotten them all..."

Harry nodded to him, having no response for this. At this point, he was simply bracing himself for another frontal assault from Daisy Furuncle. This was the pleasant thought going through his brain as he started going up the four flights to his room.

"You take your shower first, Hermione", Ginny was saying magnanimously as they trudged up the stairs. Draco was sharing with Ron (they were getting along surprisingly well, aside from Ron beating Draco at chess and telling him he thought highly of Wormtail for selling Draco out as a baby) and Harry with Sirius, so neither of them had to wait while someone else used the shower. Draco stopped in front of Ginny and moved his face very close to hers.

"If you'd like to join me, you won't have to wait to shower..." he said softly, as he put his arms on either side of her and started licking her earlobe. Harry and Hermione looked at each other; he saw that Hermione was rolling her eyes.

"Subtle, Malfoy. Very subtle."

He looked up at her; he had removed his shirt upon returning to the castle, and the run had given his work-hardened muscles a sheen of perspiration. His grey eyes narrowed. "Is that how Potter got you into bed, Granger? By being *subtle*?"

Harry started to move toward him, and Hermione put out her arm to stop him, although she needn't have; Harry had frozen, staring at Malfoy's sternum, where the basilisk amulet was resting. "Don't bother Harry", Hermione said, not noticing the amulet or Harry's reaction to it. "He's not worth it." However, he wondered whether she was thinking about the Prophecy, and how they couldn't afford for anything to happen to Malfoy. He also wondered when Malfoy had started wearing the basilisk. "You take the shower in our room, Ginny", Hermione went on, climbing the stairs wearily, oblivious to the fact that Harry's attention had been caught by the bright silver snake Malfoy was wearing. "I can ask Katie if she minds my using the one in Mercy's room."

Ginny wormed her way past Malfoy, looking a little alarmed by him. Harry watched him watch her go, his eyes still narrowed. When she was out of earshot, Harry felt he just couldn't help what he said next.

"Well, she's still managing to resist your charms, I see."

Malfoy turned, murder in his gaze. "It's all your fault", he spat, his fists clenched.

Harry's eyebrows flew up. "Oh really? How do you reckon that?"

Draco Malfoy opened his mouth to answer, then closed it again and went striding past Harry up the stairs to the third floor. "None of your business."

What? Harry thought. *He's going to say it's my fault and then not tell me?* He watched the other boy go, then, shaking his head, he continued up the stairs to the top floor. Ginny had disappeared into the room she was now sharing with Hermione. Harry was soon under the warm spray of his own shower, pondering Draco Malfoy's accusation.

When he was dressed again, he started going down the spiral stairs to the ground floor, but he was sidetracked by finding both Katie and Hermione on the second floor landing, looking out of the window into the courtyard. He walked over to them.

"What's going on?" he asked casually. Hermione and Katie both turned to him with slightly glazed expressions, then Hermione turned back to the window. Katie smirked.

"Just Ron", Katie said. "And Prof — I mean, Remus. *Training*."

She let Harry move close enough to the window to see. Ron and Lupin were in the courtyard, wearing only loose-fitting black trousers, rather like pajamas. They were moving slowly in unison, as though fighting unseen opponents. They moved forward, their fists punching the air, then to the side; swinging around, they kicked and yelled simultaneously. Ron's freckles had become dense enough that they almost resembled a tan, like Charlie's, and his muscles rippled as he moved. He was definitely hairier than before he was bitten, but he was taking pains to trim his beard and mustache very closely every morning, so that they were like dark red lines on his skin rather than adding any discernible size to his thin face. Harry could see Lupin's muscles more clearly as well, and the scars he carried from years of transformation. Those marks, evidently, did not heal as quickly as other wounds sustained by a werewolf. Ron was relatively unmarked except for a pale line of skin on his left shoulder that was the legacy of his life-changing bite from Lupin. He'd had the advantage of only having transformed once without the Wolfsbane Potion; he hadn't been doing himself damage every month for over thirty years.

Now Harry noticed that Hermione was wearing a different running bra than she'd worn for their trek around Loch Ascog, and matching loose blue trousers. He frowned. "What are you up to, then?" She smiled at him mischievously.

"I'm going to go down and join them. This isn't my gi obviously", she said, gesturing to her clothes. *Her ghee?* Harry thought, mystified. "But it's a bit hot for that. I think Ron and Remus have the right idea. I've been

training since the beginning of the holiday. I found a dojo only about half an hour from home. My dad's been taking me. I was saving it as a surprise for Ron."

"You found a — a *what*?" Harry said, no less mystified, but she didn't bother to answer him, instead skipping cheerfully down the spiral stairs to the ground floor and out the door into the courtyard. Ron stopped cold when he saw her. She walked to Lupin, bowed deeply, then took her place at Ron's side. Lupin nodded at them both, and they began again, Hermione moving in perfect unison with the other two, every gesture and kick done with complete precision and forethought.

"*She knows it*," Harry said, softly marvelling. Katie nodded.

"Right. She says she just learned that kata. That's what she called it. Actually, she gave it another Japanese name I can't remember just now. A title, rather. It *is* a kata. She learned it at that dojo. That's a kind of karate studio. She looks good, doesn't she?"

He watched the three of them continue their odd dance, intense concentration etched on each face. "They all do. I hope this helps Ron. I hope he'll be all right."

Katie nodded, lacing her fingers through his. "I think he will be. He has her — she wants to be right by his side, every step of the way. And with Remus for a mentor, I don't see how he can go wrong. Plus, isn't Professor Snape — I mean — oh, hell, I don't think I can *ever* call him anything other than Professor Snape. Anyway — isn't he making that potion for both of them? That should help too."

Harry looked into the courtyard again. "Yes. Without the potion, the full moon is really rough on them. I was with Ron when he transformed the first time. In my golden griffin form I was safe. I can't believe he's like this all because of Pettigrew..."

She shook her head. "He's in custody now, he's confessed, and your godfather is a free man. Think about that."

He looked down at her; her eyes were very bright and she seemed a bit flushed. Was it from watching Ron and Lupin? he wondered. He cupped her cheek in his hand. His voice was barely a whisper. "If you insist. But I think, just maybe, right now — I'd rather think about you."

She looked up at him, an expression of both hope and surrender lurking behind her eyes; when he leaned over and brushed his lips against hers she didn't pull back. She slid her arm up behind his neck slowly, to hold him in

place, before gently parting her lips. Harry had quickly grown to like kissing Katie very much, and he moved his right arm around her waist, pulling her to him, closing the gap between them.

After a minute, he moved his lips down to her neck, gratified to hear a startled little gasp from her at the sensations he was sending through her. But he was perplexed when, a few moments later, she pushed him gently away and said, "We need to talk, Harry."

That doesn't sound good, he thought. She turned and went into Mercy's room, sitting on the window seat, identical to the one in Harry's room. She looked at him very earnestly.

"I wanted to talk to you about this first, because I wanted you to know I plan to do it now no matter what you think, so you might as well be all right with it instead of fighting me."

He furrowed his brow. "Fighting you about what?"

She sighed. "I've been thinking about this for a while, but I've *really* been unable to get it out of my head since those damn invitations showed up last night. I mean — Alicia is my friend, and I never particularly like Fleur Delacour, but — oh, Harry, I just can't not tell Ginny about what that bastard did in the hedge maze! I couldn't live with myself. I've felt awful. I feel guilty every time I see Ginny, and she's been so cold toward *me* I could almost believe that she *knew* I was keeping it from her if it weren't for the fact that she's still very cozy with Draco Malfoy... I have to do this. It's the right thing to do, and nothing you can say will change my mind."

Harry looked at her. "I see." He swallowed. He tried to remember whether this would violate a promise he'd made to Malfoy; after thinking about their talk in the scullery, he realized it didn't. "Well, I only told Malfoy she wouldn't hear it from me. I even warned him I couldn't control you, that if you wanted to tell Ginny, you would. It isn't as though he hasn't been warned. I just — well — if you could, just keep me out of it. Don't say anything about me if you can help it." She nodded and he put his finger under her chin, lifting it up. "You're not worried, then?"

Her voice shook as she said, "About what?"

"About me running off to her when she dumps Malfoy."

Katie turned her head away from him, and her eyes looked wet. "I can't let that rule me. I can't let that keep me from doing what's right."

Harry turned her face back toward him, his hand gentle on her cheek. "Have I told you lately how amazing you are?" he said softly, leaning toward her to kiss her gently again, still cupping her cheek in his hand. It was a small, brief kiss, but he saw that it made her smile.

Then they heard a step on the stone stairs; the door to Mercy's room was still ajar. "In here!" Katie said abruptly, yanking on Harry's arm and thrusting him into the en suite bathroom. She slammed the door on him, fortunately not amputating any fingers in the process, and he heard her open the door to the room wider (the hinges squeaked) and call, "Ginny! Can you come in here? I need to talk to you."

As he heard both girls' footsteps pass the bathroom, Sandy hissed to him, "*She will not believe.*" His heart thudding, he very gently turned the doorknob and pulled the door back a fraction of an inch, so he could put his eye to the crack and see the two girls. *Damn!* Was there any way for him to tell Katie not to do it? How would it look for him to come rushing out of the bath? He was stuck now, and he felt like watching and listening to this would be like witnessing a train wreck he hadn't been able to prevent. It was worse than watching events unfolding in a Pensieve; you knew you truly had no way to change those. This was more like the time he and Hermione had used the Time Turner, and she had to prevent him from trying to get at the Invisibility Cloak...

Katie dove right in. "Ginny, there's something that's been on my mind about you and Draco... I wouldn't feel right if I didn't say something..."

They were both sitting on the window seat. Rather than seeming merely curious, Ginny looked downright hostile now. Harry frowned. *Is she still going to be jealous of Katie, even though she's basically told me to sod off?* he thought. This sentiment was fighting a war inside him to leap for joy that she evidently still *cared*, that she had been displaying classic symptoms of being jealous of Katie Bell since she got in the car at the Burrow...

If she left Draco Malfoy, would I still pursue her? he wondered. *I don't want to be using Katie just to make Ginny jealous.* He remembered his kiss with Katie mere moments before.

"What is it?" Ginny said testily, her arms crossed.

Katie looked both grim and nervous. "Well, it's about something Draco did when we were on the job..."

Ginny widened her eyes. "Oh, is that how it is? It's just Draco, now? *You* had nothing to do with it?"

Katie stopped cold. "Me? What on earth are you talking about?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Draco's *told* me."

Harry had never seen Katie look more shocked. "He *told* you? And — and you're all right with it?"

Ginny shrugged. "It was a joke. I'm not going to get hacked off at him for that. Evidently *you* have no sense of humor. You have to face facts; he's *my* boyfriend."

Katie looked flabbergasted. "A — a *joke*? You *can't* be serious. How can you call that a joke? And I *know* he's your boyfriend. My condolences."

"Nice try. Yes, it was a joke. What? Did you think Draco really wanted to kiss you?" Harry's eyes widened; so did Katie's, but she was speechless. "He wrote to me and told me everything that happened. I can go get it." She disappeared and was heard going up the stairs again; in a minute she had returned with a folded parchment. Katie's eyes narrowed.

"Would you mind if I read that?" she asked, her voice suspicious. Ginny shrugged again and handed it to her. Harry hoped she would read it aloud, which she did.

"*Dear Ginny, I hope you won't be cross at me and take something I did the wrong way. It was all in fun, to teach Harry and Katie a lesson, but in case they twisted it when they told you about it, I wanted to make sure you knew the truth.*" The truth! Harry fought the urge to hit something as Katie continued. "*The two of them have been snogging so much when they're supposed to be working it's put me off my lunches. I think it's very unprofessional. At any rate, yesterday I wasn't two feet away from them when they started in again, and when they finally came up for air, I pulled Katie to me and said, 'Well, as long as this seems to be one of the perks of the job now, don't forget me', and I kissed her.*

"*Harry was pretty hacked off. Katie pretended to be, but I had a hell of a time getting her off my face for someone who supposedly didn't want to be kissing me. They both said they'd tell you about it. They also said they'd tell you I'd done worse, just to get me back. So be forewarned; anything they say, take it with a grain of salt. They're not very happy with me right now, to put it lightly. Those two have NO sense of humor.*

"I miss you so much, and they know that, and yet they have the nerve to throw their randy new relationship in my face. They even did it in the hedge maze on the property, and we could all hear them yelling and moaning. Unbelievable. I was bloody embarrassed to admit we went to the same school (even if the Muggles think it's some ruddy public school).

"Anyway, even though I thought what I did was damn funny at the time, I was afraid they would find a way to use it against me. Knowing how sweet and trusting you are, I was afraid you'd assume the worst and so I wanted to write to you as soon as possible to confess my little prank. Please forgive me. It was all in fun (and because they were REALLY getting on my nerves). Did I mention that I miss you dreadfully? I'm glad I'll be seeing you soon, even if it is to celebrate Harry's birthday. All my love, Draco."

Harry had no words to describe what he was feeling. Outrage didn't do it. Betrayal wasn't terrible enough. He was almost willing to think that if Draco Malfoy could write a letter like that, *he* could possibly be using the pen name 'Daisy Furuncle' to drag his name through the mud. After all, he knew how to Apparate, he could do magic whenever he wanted, and he could easily have gone down to the park to see Jeffries' show when his aunt went for healing. Maybe Mrs. Figg had the ingredients for Polyjuice Potion in her house, or he'd managed to coerce a number of different witches to go to the *Prophet* offices for him...

Harry had been momentarily distracted by these thoughts, but now he focused his attention again on the two girls. Katie was as bowled over as Harry, it seemed.

"I don't believe this!" Katie's voice rose in pitch. "He never kissed me! And Harry and I certainly have done no snogging on the job or shagging in a hedge maze! It was your precious boyfriend who was doing the shagging. We heard him, clear as day, with our employer's *daughter*."

Ginny's arms were still crossed and she looked at Katie with one eyebrow raised. "Mmm. He *said* you or Harry would say something like that..."

"I'm not just *saying* it!" Katie was very near hysteria now. "It's true!" Her color had risen and Harry could see she was very frustrated at not being believed.

"Oh, and I'm supposed to believe that after finding the two of you in bed together at the pub?" Harry knew he shouldn't have felt hopeful at the

slightly jealous tone in her voice, but he couldn't help it.

"That — that was the first time! That has nothing to do with anything. I'm telling you the truth, Ginny. And you should have *heard* his rationalizations about why he slept with her! He'd been pressuring you because he was going mad, and he reckoned now he had an outlet, he could let you wait as long as you needed to. Harry and I both heard them! Ask *him* if you like!"

Ginny shook her head. "I wouldn't have believed it of you Katie, but now —"

Katie smiled. "You believe me?"

"— I believe Draco when he told me you were trying to break up the two of us so you could go after him and so Harry could go after me. He hadn't figured that out yet when he wrote me the letter. He told me in Leicestershire that that's what he suspected. But it's not going to work. You're not going to get my boyfriend, Katie Bell. And I can't believe you're using Harry this way. He deserves far better."

Now Katie had the appearance of someone about to do some long-distance spewing. "Me! And Draco Malfoy! I told you — he didn't kiss me. Trust me, he wouldn't be *alive* if he'd tried that on me." Harry believed this. "I wouldn't take him if he was the last male mammal on the planet! I'd sooner go in for bestiality and take my chances with cross-species breeding before I'd go for him. Although actually, as he's not *human*, that would *also* qualify for cross-species breeding. You must be mad if you think I want to be with Draco Malfoy!"

"Well — Harry *was* rather carrying a torch for me for a while. Don't get me wrong — I was crushing on him when I was younger, and he had every right to think —"

"— I think *he* still is —" Katie said quietly, looking down; then she looked like she wanted to bite her tongue, as this partially supported Ginny's accusation.

"Then why would you tell me something that — if I believed it — would be the sort of thing designed to break up me and Draco if you really wanted to be with Harry? And if you think Harry still has feelings for me? If I didn't have a boyfriend, and if — as you yourself say — Harry's still carrying a torch for me, don't you think he'd come after me? If you really wanted to be with *him* you wouldn't want to break us up."

Katie lifted her chin. "I don't know where — if anywhere — my relationship with Harry is going, but I do know that when I see a cheating bastard I feel it my duty to point it out! If that means you two break up and Harry decides to pursue you, so be it, but at least I know I've done the right thing!" Her color had risen, and suddenly Harry felt even more conflicted about his feelings for both of them.

Ginny looked at the date on the letter. "Draco wrote this weeks ago. In the letter he says it happened `yesterday'. Is that correct?"

"The things that happened `yesterday' when that letter was written are the things *I* said happened, not what *he* said happened. But otherwise, the date is correct, yes."

"Hmmm", Ginny said in a musing sort of voice. She started fingering a silver chain around her neck. "So — you feel so obliged to point out a cheating boyfriend to his unsuspecting girlfriend, yet you waited all this time? Why didn't you tell me sooner, if he really did what you said? Wouldn't that be more like *covering up* for a cheating boyfriend? Of course, what you're saying happened never did, so it's really neither here nor there..."

"But — but —"

She shook her head. "I feel sorry for poor Harry. He likely has no idea you were using him to try to make Draco want you. I'm assuming you knew we weren't sleeping together. Harry overheard us having a little row about that on Draco's birthday, and I suppose he told you. Oh, don't get your hopes up — we made up. But I imagine you thought your little performance in the hedge maze would tempt Draco into your arms..."

Katie looked like she *really* wanted to retch now. "Is that what he told you? And for the last time, the first and only time was in the pub and we did *nothing* on the job! The maze was Draco and that other girl!"

Ginny rolled her eyes, ignoring Katie. "And *then* you tried it again, knowing the three of us would be walking into the room at the pub —"

"We did not! If we'd thought anything of the sort we'd have been wearing some clothes, for one thing. What do you take me for?"

"*You're* the one who was in a bed naked with someone you'd been seeing for less than a month. What do *you* think?" Then Harry noticed that, as she was talking, she had pulled the thing that was on the silver chain out of her blouse. He saw it for only a split second before she clutched it tightly in her hand.

The other basilisk amulet.

"I — I —" Katie floundered, speechless. She looked at Ginny, helpless in the face of so much misinformation.

Ginny's expression changed suddenly as she clutched the amulet. She looked startled; woken up. Then she looked angrier than Harry had ever seen her. She strode over to the bathroom and abruptly pushed open the door, banging him on the knee with it.

"Ow!" he yelled, even though he'd half-anticipated it. She threw herself at him, pounding his chest with her fists.

"I can't believe you had her — had her *force* herself on him just so — just so —" She weakened and stopped her assault, looking up at him, tears running down her face now. He didn't try to defend himself or stop her attacking him; her eyes were wild. Did she *really* believe Draco Malfoy? he wondered. Or did she feel that she *had* to?

He looked down at the basilisk amulet hanging against her blouse, then up at her flushed face. "What do you see when you touch it, Ginny?" he whispered. She looked at him for an agonizing half-minute, standing tantalizingly close to him, her eyes wide with fright. Then she turned and fled the room.

"Stay away from my boyfriend!" she threw back at Katie before running up the stairs. Harry wondered whether she was truly referring to Draco Malfoy.

He sheepishly emerged from the bathroom. Katie sagged against the window, still trying to get her breath. Harry shook his head and sat next to her. "I'm sorry. I should never — I had no idea the depths to which he could sink..."

Katie sighed, her breathing finally normalizing. "That's all right, Harry. I just need you to promise me one thing —"

"What?"

She looked at him with a steely glint in her eye. "Get. Her. Away. From. Draco. Malfoy. *Save* her, Harry. He's gotten into her *head*. She's no longer sane! Whether you convince her to be with you or just *not* to be with him, do whatever you have to do to *break them up!*"

Harry smiled. "Yeah, only — anything I say is immediately suspect, isn't it? Even more so now than before." Then he clamped his mouth shut abruptly; he didn't want to make it sound like he was accusing her of making things worse. He remembered now the Draco from his other life

and the many schemes they'd hatched with their Slytherin cunning. He looked at her with a sly smile.

"Did I ever tell you that the Sorting Hat wanted to put me into Slytherin?"

She looked shocked. "No!"

"Well, obviously it didn't, but — I can be as crafty as a Slytherin when I want to be..."

A grin pulled at the corner of her mouth. "Care to tell me what you have in mind? I can keep a secret."

"Nothing in particular yet. But after school starts, I'm going to stay on my toes. I reckon with a school full of girls, Malfoy's bound to slip up sooner or later. I'm going to make sure I know about it when he does — and that Ginny knows soon after that. And I mean, the *truth*. The *real* truth. Not Draco Malfoy's version of the truth."

Katie looked outraged again. "I can't *believe* he had the nerve to claim that I — I —"

"Believe it. Nothing's beyond him. I've learned that the hard way. He has a way of convincing Ginny to do things that common sense *should* tell her she shouldn't do — like when the two of them pretended he was assaulting her in the potions dungeon..."

"What?"

"It was an act, and the end result was that his dad was sent to Azkaban, but still — I thought Ron would kill him and wind up in Azkaban himself. And when I carried Ginny up to the hospital wing, all I could think was that it was a trauma that would haunt her for the rest of her life..."

Katie shook her head. "I can't believe they did that..." she whispered incredulously.

"I don't blame Ginny — like I said, he gets inside her head. The same thing happened when she was in first year —" he started to say, then stopped himself.

"What?"

"Er, um — nothing. Never mind." He forced a yawn and stretched. "I'm exhausted after my run. Care to join me in the kitchen?"

"Sounds good. Arguing with a brainwashed person has me done in. I need some good strong tea. And then maybe a nap."

They walked down to the kitchen together, holding hands. He marvelled at her nerve; he didn't think there were many girls in her

position who would have confronted Ginny with that information.

He thought again about the elaborate story Draco Malfoy had woven, and the fact that they were both now wearing the basilisk amulets. *Had she seen him or Malfoy?* he wondered again. He had no idea how he was ever going to break through the spell her boyfriend seemed to have cast on Ginny Weasley. He wasn't sure where his relationship with Katie was going, but he felt very strongly that — Prophecy or no Prophecy — what he really needed to do was to find whatever evil diary Draco Malfoy had crawled out of and stab it very hard with a basilisk's tooth.

Undermining

Not surprisingly, Ginny decided she'd stayed at Ascog long enough. She said she wanted to be home with her parents, getting to know her sister better. Draco Malfoy didn't want to stay without her, and he wanted to get back to work and make more money, at any rate. He was invited to the wedding at the end of August, but as he wasn't in the wedding party he wouldn't be staying at the Spinnets' the week before. He was going to Apparate to Diagon Alley, and Mrs. Figg was going to pick him up outside the Leaky Cauldron. (The anti-Apparition spells on her house prevented him from traveling there using that method, and there were no really safe Apparition points in the village.)

Katie was going back to her dad's as well, but Harry was worried about her driving the whole distance by herself (she *could* just Apparate, but Sam needed his car back). On the other hand, suggesting that Katie and Draco share the car — just the two of them — all the way back to Mrs. Figg's wasn't going to go over well after the Katie-Ginny confrontation.

"I'll go with you", Harry said as they sat at the breakfast table the next morning. He and Katie were sitting with Sirius at one end of the long table, Sirius' nephews and niece at the far end. Everyone else had already eaten. "I can't help with the driving, but at least you won't be alone. I can use your fire to come back here by Floo."

Sirius insisted that they check in frequently. (Mrs. Weasley had sent Hedwig to Ascog, so they could take her along.) He also gave the two of them a map of wizarding Britain, which included how to find the wizarding quarters of the large cities they'd be passing through and a number of wizarding pubs with good accommodations. "Keep me abreast of where you are; I can Apparate to your location and ride with you some. I know *you're* going to begin Auror training soon", he said to Katie, "but I still felt better when Harry was traveling with *three* people who were of age, not just one."

Harry bristled. "I'm of-age now, too, remember. And Lupin — er, Remus — can tell you about my Dark Arts skills."

Sirius nodded. "Yes, yes, Harry, you're very impressive. I just want to make sure you don't get cocky, all right?" Sirius sighed, and Harry was

ashamed of having been so touchy; he wouldn't have objected to Severus Snape suggesting the same thing, but then, in his other life, Snape had been his father figure for more than ten years, with instincts that were usually spot-on. Sirius wasn't used to his new role as a surrogate father and his insecurity showed frequently.

Katie was frowning at Sirius. "That's right — you can Apparate! But — you were in Azkaban..."

Sirius raised an eyebrow at her. "I was cleared, remember? And why shouldn't I be able to Apparate?"

Katie looked guiltily at Harry, who immediately said to Sirius, "You know. Because former Azkaban prisoners aren't allowed to." He turned to Katie. "It didn't occur to me that would apply to Sirius, though, as he was innocent."

Sirius shook his head. "There's no ban on former Azkaban prisoners Apparating", he said quietly, looking quizzically at Katie. She drew her lips into a line, looking down at the table.

"I know", she said, looking up at Harry again. "That was a lie, Harry. I'm sorry."

Harry was confused. "Why should you lie about that? So your dad is permitted to Apparate?"

"Well —" she began, her voice shaking.

"— or didn't he ever get his Apparition test?" Harry suggested.

Sirius shook his head. "All Aurors have to have their Apparition test. Can you imagine an Auror who couldn't Apparate?" Harry hadn't thought about that; it was still slightly foreign to him, the idea of gentle Sam working as an Auror.

"You see", Katie started to say to them both softly, looking around. Mercy and her brothers were sitting at the other end of the kitchen table, eating their breakfasts still. "There's — there's not much magic Dad can do anymore. At all. The dementors — they sucked it out of him. All of his magic, I mean. Or almost all."

Harry remembered that Sirius had said, in the Shrieking Shack at the end of his third year, that the reason he was able to hold onto his powers was that the dementors hadn't driven him mad; when he was a dog, his emotions didn't feel like human ones to them. On top of that, his overriding thought was that he was innocent. Since this wasn't a happy thought, they couldn't suck out of him. But then he frowned, remembering

the lecture he'd had from Mrs. Figg and then Hermione about magic genes. "Are you sure? Maybe they didn't turn off his magical genes. They might have just — just messed around with his mind so he doesn't believe in himself." He was reminded of Rodney Jeffries. "That's it!" he said suddenly. "What Sam needs to do is find Rodney Jeffries! My aunt was a Muggle, and he made her believe in herself and turned on enough of her magic genes that she's actually a witch now! Or at least, I think she is. I'm sure he could help your dad!"

Sirius shook his head. "No one knows where Jeffries is, Harry. And even if we did know — he's wanted by the magical as well as the Muggle authorities. I don't think the Ministry of Magic wants him going around creating more magical people at this time..."

"But Sam's already a wizard!" he said forcefully.

"Not really", Katie said softly. "Not any more. That's why he's been working for Aberforth since he's been out; he can't really function as a wizard any longer. The dementors —"

They were all silent. Then Harry had a horrid idea; if the dementors could do that over time to a person who'd been with them in Azkaban, what about someone like his Aunt Petunia? Or might the Ministry — or Voldemort — use dementors to leech the magical ability out of other people? He'd been afraid that the Ministry would try to turn 'new' witches and wizards back into Muggles, and Voldemort would then use the technique on Muggle-born magical people — or just anyone he didn't like. In retrospect, he realized that perhaps no new technique needed to be invented — other than finding a way to speed it up. It had been in use by the Ministry all along, but the dementors — except during Harry's third year of school — had been segregated at Azkaban, where the rest of the population — wizards *and* Muggles alike — wouldn't be exposed to them. Now Harry had an even better understanding of why that was.

He looked around the room again; the children had finished eating and were dutifully putting their plates in the sink. Mercy turned her head suddenly and gave him one of her disturbing, penetrating gazes, with those odd pale eyes. He shivered involuntarily.

He also wondered whether this room was *really* empty of Third Eyes. Somehow, it didn't seem the time to bring up his dementor fears, just in case. He already knew Dumbledore worried about the dementors becoming

followers of Voldemort. He remembered huddling in the corner of his cell in Azkaban...

"But", Katie went on, "when you were in Azkaban, it was for even longer than my dad. And he wasn't in solitary — there were others around whose minds the dementors could feed on. Why weren't you affected the same way my dad was?"

"Because I am an Animagus", Sirius said simply. "Yes, I had two dementors posted outside my cell. And whenever I was in my human form, they made me feel utterly miserable and wretched. But when I was in my Animagus form, they couldn't really get hold of my mind; it didn't feel like a human mind to them, and my emotions didn't feel like human emotions. Technically, they weren't. That's also how I was able to escape."

Harry vividly remembered walking past the dementors in his griffin form, leaping from the barren rock with his wings spread, facing the coast of Scotland... Suddenly he had a thought. "Wormtail! He's an Animagus too! Did you tell them how you escaped? Do they know that they have to prevent Wormtail from doing the same thing?"

Sirius nodded. "Numerous precautions have been made against Peter being able to transfigure himself. They know the danger. I explained to the Ministry exactly how it was that I escaped, and how I prevented the dementors affecting my mind as much as the other prisoners. Although, once again — I believe Peter thinks he is safest in custody, and is unlikely to leave that safety."

Harry frowned. "Yeah, and I believed I helped bring him in against his will. Don't you think it's also possible that they won't be as vigilant about a prisoner they think is there willingly? Don't you think he *knows* that?"

Sirius considered this. "You make a good point. I'm going down to the Ministry in a few minutes to see Peter; I'll bring it up with the appropriate parties. I should be back before lunch."

"To see *Peter*!" Harry was shocked; and suddenly, he realized that all during the recitation of Wormtail's crimes, Sirius had called his old comrade 'Peter', not Pettigrew or Wormtail. He scrutinized Sirius, who hardly seemed to be the same man willing to risk going back to Azkaban for killing Peter Pettigrew only three years earlier.

"Yes, Harry. I'm going to visit him. There may be something else he can tell us before they take him off to Azkaban. They'll be stunning him

before they do that, by the way; he won't be revived until he's safely in his new cell."

Harry considered this; in some ways, it didn't seem fair that Wormtail wouldn't have that terrifying first glimpse of the stone fortress that he had had when he was taken to prison in his other life. On the other hand, if being stunned prevented him from escaping, it really did seem like the best course of action.

Ron was looking stunned himself when Harry told him he was driving back to London with Katie.

"Erm, just the two of you? And after all — the two of *us* are here to see *you*, and now you're running off to London." They were in the courtyard; Harry was in a chair he'd carried out from the desk in the sitting room and Ron was on a stone bench that was built into the outer wall. Harry tilted the chair back on two legs, his feet up on the bench beside Ron. Hermione was lying down on the bench, her head on Ron's leg, sleeping off her exhaustion. She'd been for an early run with Harry, Ron, Draco and Ginny, and then trained with Ron in the courtyard. Ron touched her shining curls tenderly as she slept.

"I'm not abandoning you", Harry assured him. "I'll be coming back by Floo. It will only take a couple of days. We can cut across the country. We don't have to go by way of Leicestershire and Exeter, since we won't be stopping at your place and at Maggie's. We really only brought the car coming up here because we couldn't very well Floo to Maggie's house. And maybe — this will give the two of *you* a chance to get closer." He raised an eyebrow, hoping Ron would take the hint. His best friend grimaced.

"Harry, you have no idea how much I want for us to get *closer*." Ron's voice was even more suggestive than Harry's. "But — I don't want to rush things. I don't ever want to hurt her. I mean *physically*. It's a good thing I can do magic whenever I want now; I'm still using *Reparo* all the time, it seems..."

Harry smiled. "I've only seen you break two things since you've been here. And they were easily fixed. Hermione isn't a teacup, Ron. She's tougher than you think."

Ron looked down at her sleeping face again, his feelings plain. "You know what she's done, don't you, Harry?" he whispered, awe in his voice as

he regarded her. "In addition to her Animagus training, she's been going to the dojo, meditating —" Harry nodded.

"For you. And you did it first, partly for her. I couldn't believe how you managed to calm Maggie when I almost sent her off the deep end. You did slip a bit this morning, though. I thought you were going to kill Malfoy when he started talking about Ginny *and* Hermione." As usual, Malfoy had felt it necessary to comment on the girls' running outfits. Ron frowned deeply.

"Malfoy will probably be my ultimate test. If I can prevent him from getting me hacked off, I'll know I'm completely in control of my werewolf temper..."

Harry laughed. "You never needed to be a werewolf to get hacked off at him *before*. I reckon it's a good thing Malfoy's leaving before you rip his arms off." Ron grinned, evidently enjoying thinking about this almost as much as visualizing Draco Malfoy the Amazing Bouncing Ferret. Harry went on, "He *did* share the driving on the way here, though. Ah, well. I suppose even the most annoying person can sometimes be useful in spite of himself..."

Ron turned his frown into a lopsided smile. "Well, on this trip you and Katie won't have to worry about anyone walking in on you."

Harry shifted his foot to the side and lightly kicked Ron's arm. "That's not why I'm going, you prat."

Ron's smile was broader now. "No, but if you're going to be on the road for a couple of days, you'll definitely have opportunity..."

"Are you going to continue to live vicariously through me or are you and Hermione —?"

"*Don't*, Harry. Don't say it." Ron looked angry now. Harry shrugged.

"You just seem awfully interested in *my* sex life." He looked at Ron's face again to see what his reaction would be to this statement.

"Well, I can't *have* a —"

"Why the hell not?" Harry interrupted him impatiently.

Ron looked grumpier by the moment. "You don't have to worry about whether you're going to put Katie in hospital with broken bones, Harry. Last month, before the full moon — I can't describe it. There was this kind of *mania* running through me. I thought I would go absolutely mad. It wasn't hard for me to understand that day why people who are nutters are called 'lunatics'. The moon was certainly making *me* insane. I hate to think

what I could have done to another human being in the same room with me..."

"So don't spend that time with another person!" Harry said, irritated. "Only do — that sort of thing — during other times of the month! How hard is that to work out?" He stopped just short of calling Ron stupid, feeling this wouldn't go over very well. But then Hermione started to stretch and yawn; she turned over so she was facing up, her eyes still closed. Ron put his finger up to his mouth.

"*Don't wake her,*" he mouthed. Harry crossed his arms. He felt this was just an excuse to discontinue the conversation. He pulled out a Quidditch magazine he'd been looking at and started leafing through the pages, every now and then showing something to Ron in silence, while Hermione slept on.

At some point — Harry wasn't sure how long the three of them had been sitting there — Hermione started making a sort of humming noise, and, looking over his magazine, Harry saw that Ron had been lightly stroking her arm. Her eyes still closed, she reached up and found Ron's chin, her fingers dreamily tracing his jawline. Harry tried to suppress a smile. He rose unobtrusively and crept into the house, going to the kitchen for a cold drink. There was a door in the corner of the kitchen which led to a large pantry. The pantry was charmed to be very cold, and functioned like a walk-in refrigerator. Harry helped himself to some ice-cold pumpkin juice, then walked back out into the kitchen drinking it, settling himself at the long table to read the *Daily Prophet* that was scattered there.

The windows into the courtyard were open, and when he heard a small groan, he looked up, smiling as he saw the reason for the groan. Waking, Hermione had pulled Ron's face down to hers; he had lifted her up slightly so that her head wasn't on his lap any more. Their mouths were locked and his hand was in her hair, holding her face up to his. It barely registered on Harry's consciousness that Draco Malfoy had entered the room; seeing the expression on Harry's face, he turned to look out the windows. Suddenly, too quickly for Harry to stop him, he strode to the open window and stuck his head out of it, yelling at them, "Get a room, already, Weasley and Granger!"

He slammed the window shut and Hermione and Ron looked up in alarm; Harry thought it was possible they'd forgotten that anyone could see them in the courtyard. *Would they go get a room?* Harry wondered. With

only each other for company for a couple of days, maybe things would progress a little, Harry thought.

But then Draco Malfoy turned away from the windows and met Harry's frown, returning it.

"What're you looking at, Potter?" he grouched, walking to the pantry.

"What am *I* looking at?" Harry responded, breathing heavily through his nostrils. "I'm looking at a dirty rotten *liar*, that's what *I'm* looking at."

Malfoy emerged from the pantry with his own glass of pumpkin juice. He was grinning. "Oh. Right. Ginny told me that Katie tried to rat me out. Nice try, Potter, but — as usual — I was one step ahead of you."

Harry wanted to wrap his hands around his throat; for a minute he wished he had Ron's werewolf strength. "I had nothing to do with it. Katie decided to tell Ginny because she didn't feel right keeping the information to herself. She wanted Ginny to know just what you are. Unfortunately, she *still* doesn't know."

Draco Malfoy made a mock-sad face. "Aw. Am I supposed to be contrite and falling over myself to apologize? You'll grow old waiting for *that*."

"I know. You haven't got a conscience, so I know better than to wait for you to behave like people who *do*. Listen, if Ginny isn't ready to sleep with you and that's all you're interested in, fine; break up with her and see any girl you like. But don't run around shagging other girls behind her back. Make a clean break."

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you? I don't think so, Potter. You're not my boss, you know. We aren't at school right now. You're not Head Boy of the world. You're Captain of the Hogwarts Dueling Club, not of Draco Malfoy. And I don't even know what the hell you are when it comes to the damn house-elves..."

"General of the Elven Army", Harry said between clenched teeth. Malfoy laughed.

"*General of the Elven* — " he tried to echo, in a high-pitched voice, but he couldn't get the words out for his laughter. "Oh — that's just too much, Potter. I think I'm going to rupture something —" He leaned against the stone wall, laughing harder.

Harry rose; he resisted the urge to lay hands on him, instead going to the door. "Good. You'll save me the trouble of rupturing something *for* you." He stalked out of the kitchen, going down the stairs to the dungeons.

He felt a little aimless, and decided to go for a swim in the underground pool. He had to walk down two levels below the ground floor, then let himself into the men's changing room where he knew Sirius had put some swimming togs for him. After changing and selecting a towel, he went through to the pool room, which had an arched ceiling rather like the Great Hall at Hogwarts; it was enchanted to look like the outside sky at all times, so that instead of feeling like you were swimming in an underground grotto, it appeared that the pool was out in the open, under a blazing hot summer sun (far hotter, in fact, than the real sun that day). The walls were painted with an animated mural, as well, of a thriving garden (birds, squirrels and even gnomes ran through the garden, but could never escape from their two-dimensional prison), and the interior of the pool itself was painted turquoise blue, making the clear, shimmering water take on the same color.

He found that he wasn't the only one who wanted to cool off in the pool; Ginny was already there, relaxing on the steps that led down into the water. Evidently, she wasn't planning to leave Ascog just yet. She was leaning back with her eyes closed, as though absorbing the sun, but Harry knew that the enchantment didn't actually allow people to tan or burn. He swallowed; her long, slim legs extended from her simple white one-piece swimming outfit and her hair was braided and wrapped around her head, out of her way. He turned away, trying not to look at her, and placed his towel on a bench along the wall, unwinding Sandy from his arm, placing her gently on the towel. Although she liked damp environments, she wasn't a water snake, and didn't want to be in the water itself.

"Should I leave, do you think, Sandy?" he hissed softly at her. She raised her small head and stared at him.

"Why should you leave, Harry Potter? I thought you said you wanted to swim."

"Yes, I do, but — but *she's* here."

"Does she not want you to swim?"

"It's not that. She's hacked off at me."

"What?"

"She's cross with me", he explained. "She'll probably just storm off in a huff."

"Then what is the problem? She will no longer be here."

"But —" Harry said, floundering. "She'll probably tell me off first."

"Why will she tell you off?"

"Because she thinks I'm after her."

"After her?"

"That I want her to be my girlfriend."

Sandy seemed to be looking at Ginny now, then back at Harry.

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"You do."

"What —? No — no I don't", he sputtered.

"I do not lie to you, Harry Potter. Do not lie to me."

"I — I wasn't —"

"Harry Potter, do you know what it means to have the Sight?"

"It means — you can foretell the future. In your case, only a few minutes ahead and in the vicinity where you are, but still — you can See what's going to happen."

"That is not all. All who have the Sight — snake, human, Centaur, or other creatures, for other creatures *do* have the Sight — can also see the Truth. You know that I have never lied to you, Harry Potter?"

Harry clamped his mouth shut, then barely let his words escape, hissing softly, "Yes, I know you would never lie to me, Sandy."

"It is not that I never *would* lie to you. I *cannot*. I can speak only Truth. When I See things, I tell the Truth of what I See. There are more general things that can be Seen as well. Things that do not happen at a particular time. Things that Are. That too is Truth."

Harry looked at the small green snake, feeling his stomach turning over within him. He peered at Ginny over his shoulder, still lying back on her elbows while her legs floated in the clear water.

Enough of this, he thought. He couldn't bring himself to argue with Sandy any more. *She's wrong*, he thought stubbornly. He took off his watch and put it on the towel next to Sandy, then went to the shallow end of the pool and jumped in, more messily than he'd planned. Ginny was liberally splashed by his doing this and sat up spluttering.

"What —? *Harry!* You're as bad as Ron!" She wiped the water from her face and scowled at him. He stood in the waist-high water, feeling rather foolish.

Yes, he thought. *Think of me as your brother. I'll think of you as my sister. Then we'll be all right.*

"Um — sorry. I didn't realize it would be so bad."

He wondered if she was going to say anything about the day before, about his being in the bathroom listening to her conversation with Katie. About her accusation. He looked at her again; the basilisk amulet was hanging between her breasts, the silver flashing in the imitation sun.

"When did you start wearing the amulet?" he asked her suddenly.

She looked jolted. "Yesterday morning. Draco — Draco gave it to me before breakfast."

Harry nodded. "It's about time. I gave it to him over a month ago."

Ginny seemed irritated now. "Are you going to swim or not?"

He turned side to side in the water and slapped the surface lightly with his hands. "I'm just getting used to it right now. I can't really swim, anyway."

She looked genuinely perplexed. "But — but you went into the lake at school. For the second task."

"Right. Well — I had Gillyweed. That gave me gills on my neck, so I could breathe underwater. I didn't really need to know how to swim for that."

"Oh. I see." She looked around, as though worried that someone would see them. "Do you — do you want me to teach you?"

His heart was suddenly thudding very fast. Being told off he had expected. *This* he had *not*. "Er — do you want to?"

"I wouldn't have *offered*." For some reason her voice shook nervously. Finally, he nodded. "You'll need to take off your glasses, for a start", she told him.

"They're water-proof."

"Still — I think it would be a good idea. Just put them on the side."

He walked to the edge of the pool and put his glasses down, turning back to her. She was now an orange-peach-white blur. He saw her walk down the steps into the water, then come closer to him. He was in a daze for the next half-hour while she helped him learn to float, and put his face in the water without flinching, and fill his lungs without gasping before going below the surface again...

They had moved closer to the center of the pool; he came up above the surface of the chest-high water. She was standing very close to him. He tried to fling his hair out of his face and looked at her; at close range he could see her fairly clearly. He could see the expression in her enormous

brown eyes as her fingers pushed his wet hair off his brow for him, and he wanted to freeze that moment forever in time, that unguarded look she had just then. But suddenly, when her fingers came in contact with his scar, a blinding pain went crashing through his skull and he recoiled, opening his mouth in a scream and also losing his footing on the pool bottom. He went down in the water with his mouth open, inhaling copious amounts of water, then coming up gasping.

In his mind's eye, even when his eyes weren't closed, he could see the images. The people screaming, dashing about like mice before a bird of prey. The dark-cloaked figures running them down, pointing their wands... He could hear the high, cold voice and the eerie laughter... He could see crackling green light... Again and again and *again and again*...

The pain was the most incredible he'd ever felt from his scar. It was worse than the Westminster station explosion, worse than Karkaroff being killed at Draco Malfoy's initiation, worse than Frank Bryce being killed... It felt as though a white-hot poker was branding his skin and then penetrating, going into his very skull, his brain. He cried out and went down again, taking in more water. He felt Ginny's hands on him, struggling to hold onto his wet, slippery arms and torso. Then, while he was under the water, he gasped, and felt his lungs fill again with that alien substance which no human could live without, but which no human was supposed to *breathe*: water. He felt as though his lungs were exploding, and then —

Everything went black.

* * *

A body was close to his, leaning over him. A warm, soft mouth was pressed against his mouth; he felt puffs of air come from the mouth. He coughed convulsively, then instinctively turned to the side and vomited water onto the tiled floor, coughing even more afterward, feeling her soothing touch on the bare skin of his back. He rolled onto his back again, looking up at her. She was just far enough away that her features were too indistinct for him to make out her expression. He could see red hair, nose, eyes, mouth; an Impressionist's rendering of a pretty girl, but no specific girl. Her braid had come unwrapped from around her head and hung down next to the basilisk amulet, which was a blob of silver.

He tentatively reached up and put his hand behind her neck, gently encouraging her to lean down again. When she did, his hand was no longer

in contact with her neck; she did it of her own accord. Her mouth was on his, and she was giving him life again, life of another sort, then shedding soft kisses on his cheeks, his chin, his nose. With her face so close now, he could see the tracks of the tears running down it.

"I thought you were gone", she said thickly, sniffing. "And it was all my fault..."

He framed her face with his hands, holding it in place so that she was near enough for him to really see her. "You saved my life", he whispered; he hadn't enough air in his lungs yet to speak normally.

"Then", she said, swallowing, still allowing him to hold her head in place, "I guess we're even."

It seemed that they stayed there like that, just looking at each other, for a long time. Eventually, Harry broke the silence.

"I never thanked you, you know, for defending me when your dad was upset about my performing that spell on Maggie..." he whispered to her.

She reddened. "I believed what I said. That's all."

He stroked her cheek gently. "Do you know the first thing I ever remember you saying?" he asked her. She shook her head.

He smiled, no longer concerned about stopping the feelings inside him from welling up and taking him over. He was too weak at this moment to worry about denying how he felt about her. She gasped for a moment and moved back from him a fraction of an inch, and he thought it was possible that his love showed on his face, and in his eyes.

"You were defending me", he said quietly. "That's what you did the first time I ever heard you speak. I don't remember the exact words, but Malfoy was accusing me of enjoying that circus in Flourish and Blotts, when Gilderoy Lockhart was trying to get even more attention by having his photograph taken with me.

"You *knew* who he was, you knew who his father was, how wealthy and influential the Malfoys were. You didn't care. You stepped right up to Malfoy and practically screamed in his face that I didn't want all that attention..." He smiled with the memory. "You were such a wee thing back then. Well, not really short. Thin. Looked like a good breeze would blow you away."

She was growing redder by the second, but she didn't move, listening attentively to him, watching his face as though it fascinated her.

"And then — well, then I did a colossally stupid thing..."

"What?" She frowned.

"When Malfoy said —"

"Potter, you've got yourself a *girlfriend!*" Harry looked up, startled, as Draco Malfoy came striding into the room, clasp his amulet as he walked. "The only problem is, see, the one you've got there happens to be *mine*." Katie had come hurrying after him, a panicky set to her features. "I believe this one *here* belongs to *you*."

Katie crossed her arms. "We're neither of us the property of you, or Harry or anyone else, Draco Malfoy." Then she shook herself, as if annoyed that he had managed to sidetrack her. She went down on her knees beside Harry. "Are you all right? First Draco, now you —"

Harry tried to sit up, shaking his head to try to clear it. "What are you talking about?"

She looked very grim. "His Dark Mark. He fell down half a flight of stairs because of the pain. I read about it in the coverage of his dad's trial, but I almost forgot he had the thing. I didn't even know until then that the Dark Mark was anything other than that dreadful sign they used to fire into the sky. It's just about impossible to see it now for all of those stupid tattoos my father helped him get..."

Malfoy was looking at her with one eyebrow raised. "Why the hell do you think I *wanted* the tattoos? And really, now, Katie; I've *seen* you looking at those 'stupid tattoos', especially when I've got my shirt off. And look at your dad; he's got a lot more than I have —"

The Mark. Right, Harry thought. He remembered how the pain from the Mark had made him transform back into a human when he and Draco were flying over Northamptonshire, how they had fallen from the sky...

Katie behaved as though Draco Malfoy hadn't said a word, continuing to talk to Harry. "You-Know-Who must be summoning the Death Eaters. That's what it means, doesn't it? That's what *he* said", she motioned with her head to Draco. "When a Death Eater's Dark Mark hurts like that — something important is going to happen. Then — he went from rolling around on the landing in pain to suddenly deciding he needed to come running down here. He said something about Ginny kneeling over you, although I haven't any idea how he could have known..."

Draco Malfoy must have clutched at the amulet for comfort in the midst of pain, Harry realized, and — and he had seen *Ginny*.

Bending over him.

"Harry went under", Ginny explained shakily. "He breathed in a lot of water."

Malfoy grimaced. "*That's* his excuse? That's how he got you to —"

"Sod off!" Katie said unexpectedly, unable to ignore him any longer. Harry turned to her; he realized that she had seen the look on his face when he'd been gazing at Ginny. He tried to put the mask on again, to push down his feelings once more...

Katie smiled gently at Harry. "Are you all right now, Harry? Did Ginny get you out?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I guess. I don't know how —"

"I levitated you", Ginny said simply.

Katie looked at her with wide eyes. "Without your wand? *And* without being of-age?" she added. She was strongly reminding Harry of a cop again.

Ginny bristled. "It was an emergency. Underage witches and wizards are allowed to use magic in an emergency. And — I didn't think about it. Not having my wand. I just did it." Now that she was thinking about it, she sounded a little frightened of what she'd done.

"So", Katie said, calming down. "Like I said — I think something's going to happen. When you're strong enough, we'll get you upstairs and —"

"It already has happened", Harry interrupted her. He touched his scar tentatively; it was still tender. "The reason I went under was my scar; it was hurting me incredibly. I've never felt anything quite like it before..."

Malfoy crouched down, the antagonism gone from his face. "What is it? Why was I being summoned?" he asked softly. Harry looked at him; for a rare moment it was like having his old friend back.

"Diagon Alley", he whispered to the blond boy. "Voldemort has attacked Diagon Alley." As the three of them recoiled in horror, taking this in, Harry closed his eyes again, seeing the screaming, running people, the shops aflame; he could hear the maniacal laughter and feel the cold *evil* like a steel blade against his throat...

"We need to get upstairs now", he said suddenly, urgently. "We can't wait. There's — there's a wireless in the sitting room... We need to find out what's happening..."

He found his glasses and wound Sandy around his arm and the towel around his waist. The four of them rushed out of the pool room and started

running up the stairs to the ground floor, but Harry saw a number of small black dots dancing before his eyes which grew larger and larger until they merged together and he was out again. The next thing he knew, Draco Malfoy was slapping him in the face, yelling at him, "Wake up, Harry, damn you!" without actually sounding angry. For once he seemed genuinely concerned. Harry shook his woolly head and soon he was moving up the stairs again, one arm looped over Draco's shoulders, one over Ginny's, while Katie brought up the rear. They stumbled into the sitting room where Sirius was writing a letter at the desk. His parents sat close together on one of the couches, working the *Daily Prophet* crossword together. Sirius looked up in alarm when he saw the four of them. Harry and Ginny were still dressed for the pool, Harry white as a sheet and being supported by Ginny and Draco. Harry was feeling very dizzy and lightheaded and likely to pass out again at any second.

"The wireless", he gasped, feeling like an elephant was sitting on his lungs. "Turn — on — the —"

Ginny and Katie quickly led him to the other couch and he collapsed on it, while Callisto Black rose and turned on the wireless on the mantle. She raised her eyebrows at her son questioningly; Sirius shrugged. But none of them had to wonder what was going on for long as a crisp female voice blared from the wireless, telling them of the disaster that was Diagon Alley:

" — after triage, ten of the twenty-three wounded appear to be critical, according to a spokesman from St. Mungo's. The reports are still spotty, but a contingent of Aurors are making a sweep of Diagon Alley now; some Death Eaters are still reportedly holed up in Gringott's, and rumors abound that that was the real target of this attack... We are attempting to contact the Bank Manager, but he does not seem to be taking calls at this time. Alarmists are worried that this might be the beginning of another Goblin rebellion, but this reporter certainly hopes we will not see that kind of carnage again in such enlightened times... "

Harry sat up. "The bank!"

Sirius stared at him. "Did you *know* about this, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "My scar started hurting while I was in the pool. I — I saw it. Diagon Alley was being attacked by Death Eaters. By Voldemort." He closed his eyes, remembering. "Children", he said, his eyes still closed.

"There were children, and teenagers — Hogwarts students — shopping with their parents, getting their school things..."

"— Again, that is fifteen dead, twenty-three wounded, ten critically, after a Death Eater attack on Diagon Alley which has culminated in a hostage situation at Gringott's, I am now told. The Bank Manager cannot be reached and no statements have been issued by Gringott's at this time. The dead and wounded are being transported to St. Mungo's. No names have been released."

Ron and Hermione ran into the room, breathless. "We were up on the roof, and I heard the wireless saying —" Ron began, then clamped his mouth shut as the voice continued. Harry remembered Lupin talking about a werewolf's hearing abilities. Harry noticed that the sitting room windows were open; the sound would have drifted up to the roof that way (for someone with superior hearing). They all gave their attention to the wireless again.

"Witches and wizards throughout the British Isles are cautioned not to try to Apparate to Diagon Alley or Knockturn Alley. Anti-Apparition wards have been placed on the entire area to contain the culprits and all fireplaces in the Alleys have been temporarily removed from the Floo network. Do not, repeat, DO NOT, come to Diagon Alley or Knockturn Alley until the Ministry issues the all-clear. The Leaky Cauldron has also been shut to business for the duration and the public house's exit to Muggle London has been sealed."

Ursula had entered the room with her children; they had been in the courtyard, playing, but they all looked very grim now. Ursula picked up Mercy and held her tightly, the thin little legs wrapped around her mother, while her boys stood close against her; Orion was pale, his dark eyes very round.

"We were just there yesterday", he said quietly. "I — I met this other boy who was also going to be a first year. He said — he said they didn't have time to get everything he needed. He was going to be going back for the rest today —" The boy swallowed.

"...we will keep the wizarding public apprised of developments as they occur. The Minister of Magic will be making a statement later today. We now return you to the music of Screaming Haggis..."

Sirius switched off the wireless before the bagpipe music could begin blaring. They all stood staring at each other, dumbfounded. Then, as if

awaking from a sleep, Sirius looked sadly at his sister.

"Perhaps you should take the children upstairs, Ursula." She nodded, still clutching Mercy tightly to her. The girl struggled in her mother's arms.

"No, mummy, I want to stay —"

But Orion put his arm across Leo's shoulders and nodded to his uncle before turning and following his mother and sister from the room.

Sirius strode to the fireplace where his mother was still standing, staring into space, clearly shaken by the news of the attack. Harry thought that she must be remembering Voldemort's first rise to power, and finding out that he son was responsible for killing a street fully of Muggles and betraying his best friends. He put his hands on his mother's shoulders and looked lovingly into her face. "Sit down, Mum", he said gently. She looked up at her son, her youngest child, whom she hadn't seen for over a dozen years. She kissed his cheek and nodded, turning to join her husband on the couch again. It was still very strange to Harry to see an older version of Sirius with white hair and a lined face. Walter Black enfolded his wife in his arms and she put her head on his shoulder.

Sirius turned back to the fireplace; he waved his hand and flames sprang up in the cold firebox. Then he reached into a small bowl on the mantle and picked up a pinch of powder, throwing it into the fire and saying, "Albus Dumbledore!"

There was a slight delay, then a spinning head appeared in the firebox, and there, nestled amid the licking flames, was the bearded head of Hogwarts' headmaster.

"Sirius! I'm glad you called. I was just speaking to Cornelius, and —"

"So you know."

"Yes. Evidently you do as well."

"I just turned off the wireless. Harry knew first, actually. His scar."

Harry stood and walked to where Sirius was before the fire; the flames weren't very hot, but they were starting make the water still clinging to him evaporate. He reckoned it was safe, as Dumbledore would only be able to see his head in the fireplace at Hogwarts.

"Professor", Harry said shakily, "there were Hogwarts students there. Shopping."

Dumbledore nodded. "Hello, Harry. Yes, I know", he said heavily. "That was one of the things the Minister and I were discussing. Some of

the dead and wounded are young people —"

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see horror registering on the others' faces; Hermione buried her head on Ron's chest as he put his arms around her, and Ginny clutched at Draco Malfoy, while Katie looked torn between anger and sorrow.

"I'm going to be visiting St. Mungo's later today, after the wounded have received whatever medical attention is necessary. I was just about to call Ascog, but you beat me to it, Sirius. And although I'm always delighted to speak to you, I was chiefly interested in contacting Harry and Hermione..."

Hermione separated herself from Ron and stepped forward beside Harry. "Why, Professor?"

"Oh, there you are, Hermione. I had rather hoped that you and Harry might be able to come along with me to St. Mungo's. I think it might lift the spirits of the children to have their Head Boy and Girl visit... They don't really care about seeing their headmaster..."

Harry disagreed with this; it had always meant a great deal to him when Dumbledore had visited him in the hospital wing. But he didn't say so. "Of course, Professor. We'll both come. Can we get there by Floo?"

"Yes, yes. The usual procedure. Just say, 'St. Mungo's Hospital', before you get into the firebox. You will, however, need to pass through a security check after you've arrived. To verify that you are who you appear to be. You understand, of course?"

They both nodded. "Of course", they said together.

"And you'll both be on the list of expected visitors. No unexpected visitors are being accepted for the foreseeable future. Only family members of the dead and wounded. They don't want just anyone waltzing in..."

"Professor", Harry said abruptly. "What about — what about Gringott's?"

Sirius turned to Harry, frowning. "Yes; why did you say *the bank* before, Harry?" he wanted to know.

"It occurred to me that if Voldemort gets the Goblins on his side, he'll control the finances of the entire wizarding world. No one will be able to do anything unless merchants decide to extend credit, or unless they have a cache of gold at home. Some people probably do, but I don't think they're the majority. Or people will have to start using Muggle money until the

Ministry can take Gringott's back. I don't know whether Voldemort plans to start another Goblin rebellion; I think he wants to do more than that. Unless —"

"Unless what?" Dumbledore's head said from the fire.

He stared into space, frowning. "Unless it's a ruse. Something to distract the Ministry while he carries out his *real* plan..."

Ron stepped forward, looking very concerned. "What do you think that is?"

Harry turned to Katie. "Something you said earlier about your dad and the dementors made me think of it." He turned back to the fire. "But you've also said, Professor, that you think the dementors and Voldemort are natural allies..."

"Yes, I do", Dumbledore affirmed, nodding sadly.

Sirius looked at Harry, his eyes wild. "The dementors? What are you getting at, Harry?"

"Do we — do we know for certain that they can't get off Azkaban? Couldn't Voldemort just get a ship and sail to the prison and pick up the dementors and then go anywhere with them?"

"Fortunately, no", Dumbledore answered with a relieved sigh. "Azkaban is shielded from that sort of thing. Owls can find it, naturally, but it is invisible to most people, even wizards, unless they are traveling in an enchanted boat used for prisoner transport; being in the boat makes it possible to see past the shields. Of course, to the uninformed, whether wizard or Muggle, the boats all appear quite normal, and in fact —"

"— they have Muggle motors", Harry finished, remembering his trip to Azkaban, and the boat motor being switched off once they had reached the watery caves under the fortress.

"Yes", Dumbledore said cautiously, looking at Sirius, who was staring at Harry, clearly wondering how he knew this, but not saying anything.

"All right then — what if — what if the Aurors who take Wormtail there don't come back right away? How long before someone from Banff goes looking for them?"

"Someone from — how do you know about Banff, Harry?" Harry looked at Dumbledore when Sirius said this; *he* knew how Harry knew.

"That's not important right now. I'm just worried that if they keep sending Aurors in small bunches, they'll eventually get enough boats to leave the island in large numbers... and if they do, they won't go to Banff.

Too many wizards there. They'll go someplace like Fraserburgh, which is closer to Azkaban, and the Muggles there won't know what hit them..." Harry thought of the people he'd met in Fraserburgh, and the people he didn't meet, as well: the crowd of spectators at the football match, the fishermen and boatwrights whose livelihood was the sea, all of the nameless, faceless people living in the identical grey stone houses marching up the hill from the bay, those who lived in the caravan park beyond the golf club, and the cooks in the clubhouse kitchen, watching their small television and trading jokes as they chopped vegetables and cooked meals for the wealthy club members...

Sirius watched his face, no longer asking him things like how he knew Fraserburgh was closer to Azkaban than Banff. Harry looked into his godfather's haunted eyes, a man who lived in Azkaban for twelve years out of self-imposed guilt. Someone who knew dementors well, even though he had learned how to prevent them from driving him completely insane.

Dumbledore sighed. "I will bring up your concerns with the Minister, Harry. He'll be at St. Mungo's later, and we can discuss all of this in person." Harry didn't have much hope of this doing any good; he knew that Fudge liked having the dementors to guard prisoners. He was silent again, then looked up at Harry. He seemed far older than Harry had ever seen him. "Whether Voldemort's goal was to control the bank or to distract us all while he recruits the dementors, or something else entirely, you know what this attack means, don't you? What all of this means?" he asked quietly, looking very grave. Everyone seemed to be holding their breaths.

Harry nodded at him. His throat was dry, but when he spoke, his whisper sounded like a shout in the utterly still room.

"We're at war."

* * *

"What do you mean I can't go back to Surrey?" Draco Malfoy was livid. Harry was dried and dressed and prepared to go to St. Mungo's with Hermione. They were all still sitting around the kitchen table, having finished lunch. Harry remembered when Malfoy considered himself to be 'stuck' in Surrey. Sirius looked sideways at Harry.

"It was Harry's idea, and I think he has a point. At any rate, you were going to Apparate to the Diagon Alley, and you can't do that now. Diagon Alley is closed down for the time being. And Arabella's place isn't on the Floo network for security reasons — to protect the two of you."

Malfoy struck the table angrily, making the dishes jump. "So I'm stuck *here*? In the middle of bleeding *nowhere*?"

"You have two choices", Harry told him, remembering Malfoy saying earlier that he wasn't his boss outside of school. *Think again, Malfoy.* "You can drive with us to London, taking turns at the wheel with Katie to help it go faster, or you can wait for us to arrive there and then Floo to her flat, and Mrs. Figg can come up from Surrey to get you in her car."

"Why can't I just Floo to the flat now?"

Katie shook her head. "I disconnected us from the network before I left. I need to reconnect it for you to use it — Dad can't. I told Harry, dad didn't have it hooked up before I came to stay with him. He doesn't like the idea of people being able to just pop in."

Draco Malfoy brightened. "Pop in! That's it! I'll just Apparate to your flat, call Mrs. Figg to come get me —"

Katie made a face. "No." she said, an alarmed look on her face.

"No? Why not?"

"I'm not telling you where I live! If I did, you could just Apparate there anytime you wanted. If you have to rely on our fire being part of the Floo network — which it isn't always — you can't necessarily do that. Oh, and by the way, Harry and I will have to lead you out to Mrs. Figg's car, as you'll be blindfolded. So you can't see where the flat is."

"Oh, *that's* nice." He glared at Harry and Katie. "I think I'd rather drive that poky little car of yours."

"No", Harry said firmly.

Draco snorted through his nostrils. "I thought you wanted help with the driving. Worried about me walking in on the pair of you again?"

"No", Harry stressed. "I changed my mind. I think you should stay here. It's not safe for you to just take off across the country, not *now*. We can't risk you falling into Voldemort's hands!" Harry yelled at him.

"Oh, sure, I really believe you want to protect me —"

"I don't!" Harry responded. "I'm trying to protect the rest of the wizarding world, you prat! We can fight — if we have to — and if we die, we die. We won't be endangering other people. Voldemort's on the move now. The Obedience Charm keeps you from being able to hurt him, so *you* can't fight him off. If he gets hold of you and gives you a direct order, and you agree to do whatever he tells you —"

He stopped, swallowing.

Malfoy also swallowed. "How do you know I won't just refuse?" he said, voice shaking. "How do you know I won't choose to just drop dead?" His voice trailed off; Harry wondered how much he'd thought about this since finding out about the Obedience Charm, and he bit back a retort about how wonderful that would be.

"I suppose that's a possibility", he said between his teeth, not sure he believed this. "In which case I don't see why you would want to risk that happening. Just do as your told." That's *my* Obedience Charm, he thought.

Malfoy glared at him. Harry glared right back.

Finally, Malfoy stood, pounding his hands on the table again. "Fine! Call me and let me know when you're in London so I can finally see the last of this place!"

He stormed from the room. Harry looked at Ginny. He remembered saying to her, *If he died, it would have made you sad*, as his dad had said to his mum. What *would* she do if Draco Malfoy refused an order from Voldemort and dropped down dead? He'd be considered a hero of sorts, or at least a martyr...

Harry turned and looked at Katie. "Well. At least it should be a peaceful trip back to London", he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking. "My visit to St. Mungo's shouldn't take long. We can leave when I get back."

She nodded. "But frankly — I don't think we should consider stopping in wizarding districts on the way back. Somehow I think we'll be safer in the Muggle world. We can go as far as Carlisle on the first leg; that's only about two hours from Skelmorlie. We'll stay overnight in Carlisle, then in the morning we can drive to Manchester —"

Harry smiled. "We could drop in on Remus, if he tells us how to find his place. And Ruth Pelta lives in Manchester."

"All right. We could have lunch in Manchester, then drive to Birmingham, take a break there, maybe have tea, then in the early evening we can go the rest of the way to London."

Sirius nodded. "I agree with Katie; best to avoid wizarding locations. And as such, I think that when you're in Manchester, you shouldn't look up Remus. Or this other friend. You don't —" Sirius stopped suddenly, clamping his mouth shut. Harry thought he might have prevented himself from saying, *You don't want to put others in danger*.

"Are you sure you want me going, Sirius?" Harry asked, not liking the look on his godfather's face. Sirius sighed.

"Frankly, no, I don't. But I've got to accept you being of-age. Being able to take care of yourself, make your own decisions. Which brings me to something else —" He looked around nervously; there were still a number of other people in the kitchen. Ron and Hermione were sitting together with the remains of their lunches before them, trading different sections of the *Daily Prophet*. Mercy, Orion and Leo were finishing their meal, along with their mother. Sirius motioned to the doorway with his head, rising from his seat. Harry and Katie followed him from the kitchen and into the now-deserted sitting room. Sirius sat on one of the couches near the cold fireplace and motioned for Harry and Katie to sit on one of the upholstered benches nearby. He looked very uncomfortable about what he wanted to say.

"I, er, get the impression from Ron that the two of you have, er, been —"

"— intimate?" Katie asked him, bold as brass, a challenging look in her eyes.

Sirius cleared his throat. "Right. That. At any rate, I just wanted to be certain that the two of you are, er, taking certain precautions..."

"Prophylaxis Potion", Katie said simply. Sirius nodded at her.

"Good. Good to hear. But I, ah, was also thinking of other things..."

Katie sat up straight. "I've only had one other partner, and neither of us had been with anyone else before that. I believe Harry and Hermione had never been with anyone else before they were together, either. So the circle is closed", she said with finality.

Sirius' eyes widened. "Is that what Ron meant by —" Harry realized that Sirius hadn't realized the nature of his relationship with Hermione. Sirius looked at Harry. "I thought Katie was —"

"— his first?" Katie said, smiling slyly. "No. That role will go down in the history books as having been played by Hermione Granger."

Harry frowned. "That won't be in any bloody history books if I can help it. Can we stop talking about this now?" He felt very uncomfortable, and Sirius didn't look much better, but he seemed determined to do his duty as a godfather.

"Right. That's done." Sirius looked very relieved. "I believe you and Hermione", he blushed now as he said her name, "are supposed to go to St.

Mungo's soon?"

Harry nodded, and, as though he'd used a summoning charm, Hermione walked in, wearing lightweight warm-weather robes that she was buttoning over a summery yellow dress. She also wore her Head Girl badge. Harry realized, seeing her, that he should probably look very official too, instead of just showing up in jeans and a grubby T-shirt with grass stains from his former job as a gardener. He explained that this was what he was going to do and went up to his room to find something appropriate to wear. When he returned, he also had wizarding robes on over a clean shirt and trousers, his Head Boy badge gleaming on his chest. When he saw Harry wearing the badge, Sirius looked at him with moist eyes.

"I remember your dad being Head Boy", he said softly, giving Harry a quick hug before leaving the room quickly, his nose twitching. Harry watched him go, then turned to Hermione.

"Ready?"

She nodded. Katie walked to Harry and put her arms around him; he held her, and she said in a muffled voice, talking into his chest, "They'll be over the moon, getting a visit from you, you know. Anyone in hospital. I just — I do hope it's no one we know. Especially those who died —" Then she straightened up and put her hand over her mouth. "Oh, listen to me. That's terrible. As if only people I know should have the right to be unharmed —"

Hermione put her hand on Katie's arm. "No, no. I know just what you mean. I think — I think if I just find out that it's strangers who died, and who are lying in those hospital beds, I can cope. I can smile and be Head Girl and tell them it's going to be all right, and believe it, because then it won't really touch me. I don't — I don't know whether I can face anyone I *know* and say the same thing..."

Katie suddenly launched herself at Hermione, giving her a tight hug, then holding her at arm's length. "You're going to be a wonderful Head Girl, you know", she said thickly before bolting from the room. Hermione looked after her, eyes starting to fill with tears. Then she looked at Harry, annoyed.

"Oh, drat it; now I'm going to be bawling before I even *get* there..."

Harry grinned at her. "Chin up. Stiff upper lip and all that. I'll do my best Percy impression and you can do your best impression of — well, of a female Percy. You have done for years, anyway..."

Hermione swatted his arm. "I am *not* a female Percy!" But she was laughing now, he was glad to see. Unfortunately, he had a bad feeling that it would be very difficult to laugh once they arrived at St. Mungo's. They both seemed to have this thought at the same time; they sobered, and she looked up at him with large, apprehensive eyes.

"Duty calls", she whispered. This would be their first official act as Head Girl and Head Boy: visiting the wounded Hogwarts students in hospital. He went first, throwing the Floo powder into the fire and saying clearly, "St. Mungo's Hospital!" He closed his eyes as he whirled, keeping his elbows in, one hand holding his glasses to his face. Finally, he fell out of a fireplace, stumbling for a moment (he'd never been able to make a graceful landing when traveling by Floo) and quickly moved out of the way for Hermione. She emerged from the fire half a minute later.

They were standing in a large entrance hall with institutional-looking lino on the floor and dingy walls that would have been celadon green halfway up if they'd been cleaned any time in the previous fifty years. Non-dripping candles sat in sconces on the walls, their light doubled by smudged mirrors behind them. A very large, perfectly bald wizard in aqua robes sat at a large brown desk in the middle of the space; he did not look up at them but seemed to be staring at a parchment scroll before him. Harry and Hermione walked uncertainly toward the desk. Harry felt dwarfed by the cavernous space.

About three feet from the desk they encountered what seemed to be an invisible wall; they bounced back from it as though it were made of rubber. They stood before this barrier, perplexed. Still without looking up, the wizard said in a gruff, deep voice, "Names?"

They looked at each other and swallowed.

"Hermione Granger and Harry Potter", Harry answered for both of them, trying to keep his voice steady.

The large wizard looked up, his blue eyes wide. He wore one gold earring and was suddenly grinning from that ear to his other one.

"`Arry Potter!" he exclaimed. He checked the list of expected visitors. "I din' notice yer name on the list b'fore, but `ere it is! Oh, my, if I'd known `Arry Potter was comin' —"

Harry reddened; he saw that a smile was playing around Hermione's mouth.

"We're supposed to be meeting Professor Dumbledore", he said, trying to maintain some dignity.

"Yeah, `e's already `ere. Lemme see ef I kin drum'im up..."

The very excited, very large wizard left at a jog, his ample stomach and bottom bouncing as he moved, looking quite beside himself. Harry frowned, and after the wizard was gone, Hermione laughed out loud.

"You'll just have to get used to it, Harry", she said, practically breathless, "now that you'll be out in the wizarding world more often. Most people at school are used to you by now, but outside of Hogwarts —"

He rolled his eyes. "The same thing happened when Orion met me. Do you know that Sirius never once told him I was coming to live in his house? And he'll be a first-year in September, too."

"I'd be willing to wager that all of the first-years will be a little star-struck by you. I mean, entering school and finding that Harry Potter is Head Boy... Someone they've read about since they were very small. It's not like when we started at Hogwarts. Now that we're going to be seventh-years, most of the other students weren't even born when you survived You-Know-Who's curse. You're a legend to them."

Harry frowned at her. "Do you think now that you're Head Girl you could say *Voldemort*, Hermione? Honestly..."

She frowned back at him. "Don't change the subject. All right, *Voldemort*. I don't have an aversion to it frankly; it's just a reflex, something I learned to do so I wouldn't upset other people. I don't have a *thing* about it, like Ron used to."

The large wizard returned; the best word Harry could think of was that he *pranced* back to his desk on surprisingly small feet. "`Ere `e is!" he said excitedly. Harry grimaced. Albus Dumbledore came striding purposefully into the large room.

"Harry! Hermione! Good to see you. Come along, come along. I thought we'd start with the youngest first." He reached his arm through the barrier and pulled Harry and Hermione through.

"Er, sir — if you could tell us —" Harry looked over his shoulder at the large wizard and lowered his voice, "— did any Hogwarts students — did any of them die?"

Dumbledore looked at him with a very long face and sighed. "I'm afraid so, Harry. A third-year Hufflepuff, a fifth-year Slytherin — who was

to have been a prefect — and two boys who were to have been first years. The others were all adults. Well, nominally —"

"What do you mean?"

The headmaster sighed. "Someone who was recently a student... I think you knew her, as she was a prefect..."

Hermione stepped forward. "Who?" she wanted to know, her brow furrowed.

"Perhaps you remember a Ravenclaw named Niamh Quirke?"

Hermione covered her mouth. Harry looked very grim. He remembered good and not-so-good things about Niamh, but he couldn't really lay claim to knowing her. In his other life, she'd been shagging Draco in the library... but she was also Head Girl during her seventh year (since Alicia Spinnet wasn't at Hogwarts) and then she became a double agent. In this life he only remembered that she had been gossiping with her Ravenclaw friends in the library, leading Ron to sleep with Parvati... And she didn't seem to approve of her brother being with Justin Finch-Fletchley, although Harry was never really clear about that.

"I remember her", he said hoarsely. Not wanting to put it off any longer, he said, "Let's go", to Professor Dumbledore.

They walked through doorways with Gothic arches and down dingy high-ceilinged corridors, passing nurses who appeared to be wearing nun's habits from the Middle Ages. Some of the nurses carried trays of potions. They also passed aqua-robed wizard orderlies transporting patients on levitating stretchers. A clutch of doctors consisting of two wizards and a witch bustled past them at one point, wearing identical peach-colored robes and tall pointed hats which matched; each of the three was carrying an armful of files, and they were evidently arguing about how to handle a case.

"No, no, Forsythe, thorn-tree flowers — especially the stamen — must be included in the potion or it will never work. The sort from Kenya — that mutated strain that was developed near Nairobi. Didn't you read my monograph on it last year in *Journal of the WMA*? If you don't keep up with the literature, you're liable to hurt someone with your ignorance —"

Forsythe straightened up as he passed; he had a beard of both brown and grey hair and wore thick round spectacles low on his rather long nose. "I'll have you know, Clancy, that I have been brewing this potion for my dear mother for years with absolutely no ill effect — "

"— no cure in sight either, I'll warrant —" the witch with them said sarcastically; she was the youngest of the three, with abundant freckles, blue eyes, unnatural-looking blonde hair pulled into a bun at the back of her head and a nose with a jog in it, as though it had been broken at some point. She had the largest bundle of file folders in her arms. Clancy gave her a glare.

"When I need your help, Anderssen —" Clancy said, running his fingers through his bright red hair as the three of them passed Harry, Hermione and Professor Dumbledore.

Harry heard her voice behind him now. "I *read* your monograph. At least you managed to get it published. The wizarding medical establishment is still so backward. Almost all witches in medicine are nurses. I can't get a JWMA article published to save my life. I'll bet if you sent one of mine in under your name they'd snatch it up —"

Suddenly, Harry had a strange feeling that someone was staring at the back of his head. He whirled, but all three of the doctors were turning a corner and disappearing from sight. No one else was visible in the corridor.

Hermione was also staring after the doctors, as though fascinated. He recovered first and had to tug on her arm to get her to stay with him and Dumbledore. They finally reached the children's ward and Dumbledore led them to the first bed. Before the headmaster could even finish saying, "I'd like to introduce you to —"

"Harry Potter!" the boy cried, his eyes widening. Harry didn't recognize him; he reckoned he looked young enough to be going into his first year in September. At the boy's exclamation, the other young people in the ward looked up and the mobile ones started forward, surrounding him quickly.

Harry Potter, Harry Potter, Harry, Harry, Potter, Potter...

The visit became a blur to Harry, who wasn't sure how many hands he shook, how many good wishes for a speedy recovery he offered (thanks to wizarding medicine, most of them wouldn't be in St. Mungo's more than twenty-four hours). They saw only two students they knew from Gryffindor: Amy and Andy Donegal, the Muggle-born twins who were in the same year as Will Flitwick. Amy had a twisted ankle that was mending quickly and Andy had some burns from throwing himself between his attacker and his mother.

"Mum and Dad wanted to take us to a Muggle hospital", Andy told Harry, "but the Ministry wasn't letting anyone — even Muggle parents of Hogwarts students — leave Diagon Alley to go anywhere but here." Andy was clearly enjoying the other children seeing that he *already knew* the famous Harry Potter. "They're upstairs, in quarters that have been fitted out for the Muggles to stay in until we can be released. I think they're rather enjoying themselves. We can't really demonstrate magic to them at home, of course. They keep asking matron to do tricks for them; I think she thinks they're getting rather tedious."

Hermione smiled. "My parents are Muggles, too. They always loved coming with me to Diagon Alley —" She stopped abruptly, swallowing, as if thinking, *There but for the grace of God* —

Harry cleared his throat. "But soon you'll be right as rain, yeah?"

"Right", Andy said, remarkably cheerful despite his burns. "Matron said this poultice for my burns should work very fast. I can practically *feel* the new skin growing", he added, indicating the plasters on his cheek and arm and on his left leg, below his hospital smock.

Finally, Dumbledore told them it was time to leave. For a moment, Harry thought of asking where the Longbottoms were, then changed his mind. As they walked back through the depressing corridors, Harry thought, *This is where Neville comes during his holidays. To visit parents who have no clue who he is...*

He still had a hard time reconciling the Aurors who had given him — and Snape — so much trouble with the people who were Neville's parents, who were held in very high esteem by none other than Alastor Moody himself. He couldn't help picturing them when they came to take Remus away, especially now that Ron was a werewolf and risked the same sort of prejudice in the wizarding world.

Ginny had gone back to the Burrow by the time they returned to the castle. Unfortunately, Hedwig hadn't yet returned from delivering a letter to the Dursleys (checking up on his Aunt Petunia) so he couldn't take her with him. He threw a few things into a bag for the trip to London, and after saying goodbye to Sirius, Ron and Hermione, they went through the dungeons to the cottage which served as a garage. Soon, Katie was driving her father's car onto the ferry to Wemyss Bay, and soon after, they were on the road to Skelmorlie, heading for Carlisle.

Fortunately, the drive to Carlisle was uneventful, and they were quickly able to locate a pub where they could have their tea and get a room for the night. There was only one bed. *That doesn't necessarily mean anything is going to happen*, Harry reminded himself. *She's probably knackered from driving, anyway...* He wasn't even sure he *wanted* anything to happen.

While Katie was using the ensuite bath (a proper one, with the shower, sink and toilet all in the same neat white-tiled room) he undressed down to his boxers and climbed into the bed, putting his glasses on the table beside him and closing his eyes.

He heard her emerge from the bathroom and felt the covers move as she climbed into the bed, too. The orange color he was seeing through his eyelids disappeared as she turned off the light, and he refrained from sighing with relief. Evidently she was too tired for —

Wrong, he thought, as she rolled over on him, kissing his neck, then moving her mouth up to his. With a jolt, he could feel the hard little points of her breasts on his bare chest, and he instinctively put his hands on her back, feeling the smooth skin there. Moving his hands down a little further, he realized that she wasn't wearing anything at all. *Well. That makes her intentions perfectly clear...*

She broke the kiss and whispered, "All right, Harry?"

He opened his eyes then, looking at her face in the dimness. "Yeah. I'm just surprised."

She shook her head with wonder. "You're surprised. Silly, silly boy", she said softly, fitting her lips to his again and beginning to help divest him of his boxers...

Lying with her afterward as she started drifting off to sleep, he wondered why he felt more like a dutiful husband than anything else. It was almost as though they were one of those couples trying to have a child, and they needed to make sure their timing was right so they could —

"*Bloody hell*," he said suddenly, waking her again.

"Mmm — what, Harry? What's wrong?" She tried to open her eyes.

"You — you really *are* on Prophylaxis Potion, aren't you? I mean, it hasn't lapsed or anything? You're not — you're not *trying* to have a baby?" He remembered hearing her give birth to Roger Davies' baby in his other life.

She sat up then, the sheet pooling around her waist; she still wasn't wearing anything. Even in the half-light from the streetlight, he could see she was quite irate.

"Harry Potter! How dare you accuse me of such a thing!"

He suddenly realized how this sounded. "I'm — I'm sorry, Katie! I think — I was starting to fall asleep, and all sorts of ridiculous thoughts started going through my mind —"

"Ridiculous is *right*! The very idea that I would try to trap you like that! I'm beginning Auror training in a month, and I certainly do *not* have any intention of going through it while pregnant! I don't want to have a child for years to come, if at all! I haven't really made a final decision about it yet or anything, but — but *really*, Harry!"

He apologized sheepishly some more, also silently berating himself for not keeping his thoughts to himself when he was so tired, as they were invariably odd and half-formed and should never see the light of day. He kissed her cheek contritely, looking at her closely, his eyes held open very wide, hoping she would calm down soon.

Finally, she sighed and gave a small laugh. "Oh — I can't stay angry with you when you're looking at me like that. But you realize —"

"Yes, Katie. I really do. I'm dreadfully sorry and you have every right to be cross with me and to tell me what a stupid prat I am and —"

"All right, all right. Stop babbling." She laughed again. "Let's get some sleep. Just when I thought I was already done in you went and tuckered me out even more —"

She was grinning and Harry grinned back at her. "Oh, and you had nothing to do with it —"

They settled down to sleep poking fun at each other cheerfully, until they both finally dozed off, and Harry was able to finally stop worrying and rest his weary brain.

* * *

They had only just left Manchester a few minutes before and were on their way to Birmingham the next day when Sandy hissed to Harry.

"What? Do you really mean it this time?" he hissed back at her. "Because the last time you said something like that, you meant that Sirius Black was coming, so if it's Sirius you're talking about, please tell me now so I can stop worrying."

"I do not mean Sirius Black. And I thought that time I made myself perfectly clear."

Perfectly, Harry thought, grimacing, although he didn't say it aloud, in English or Parseltongue.

"Katie", said, his voice shaking, "we have a problem. Sandy says dark wizards are coming. We need to hide or something."

"*Hide?* We just got on the M6, Harry! We're supposed to *stay* on the M6 for over *seventy-five miles*! How in the hell can we just *hide*? And how *long* would we have to hide? We'd have to start moving again at *some* point."

"All right then — we need to disguise ourselves."

She snorted. "*How?* I'm driving a *car*, in case you've forgotten, on a busy motorway. How am I supposed to be able to —"

But Harry put out his hands and touched her hair lightly, his brow knit with concentration. When he removed his hands, he said, "Take a look in the mirror."

"What are you — oh!" she cried in surprise, then brought her eyes back to the road abruptly as a lorry cut across the lane in front of them. When she had her equilibrium back, she glanced in the mirror again. "Hmm. I've sometimes wondered what I'd look like as a blonde..."

"Well, now you know", he said, sitting back. She turned to glance at him now and let out a scream.

"Harry! What — how —?"

He had lengthened his hair and grown a beard, as he'd done in his other life to move about in the Muggle world when he was a fugitive. He shrugged. "Animagus training. Comes in handy for a lot of things. Growing hair was something I was actually doing when I was very young; McGonagall decided to train me because I'd done that. She thought it indicated I might have the aptitude to be an Animagus."

Katie looked like her heart was going very fast now. She shook her head as she drove. "I never know what to expect from you next, Harry."

"Let's just hope Sandy wasn't —" he started to say, but suddenly the traffic started slowing down, and instead of completing his sentence, Harry said, "I have a very bad feeling about this..."

And then he heard it; far ahead of where their car had had to come to a halt, there was a terrified cry and the sound of crackling, sizzling... Harry

suddenly pulled Katie down onto the front seat of the car, out of sight of the other people in the cars around them.

"You Apparate to the Ministry, *now!* You have to get Aurors to come help. And Obliviators; I get the impression a lot of Muggles are going to see a lot of things they shouldn't. Particularly the ones who are being attacked."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, I'm not just going to sit here and let them attack Muggles, or come after *me*; I have a suspicion someone still has an active Third Eye in Ascog, and that's how they knew I'd be on this road. If they're actually after me, that is, and I think I can be forgiven for being a *little* paranoid. Even if they're *not* after me and this is all an insane coincidence, people out there need help. And I'm going to do what I can to help them."

"But — but you'll be seen doing magic then! And how do you know you won't be grossly outnumbered?"

"I don't. But anyway, I *won't* be seen doing magic." He reached into the bag at his feet and pulled out his Invisibility Cloak. She gasped, clearly recognizing what it was.

"Now — you go get help. I'll put this on and give some Death Eaters a little surprise."

She nodded, still down on the car seat, then quickly kissed him on the lips before disappearing with a *pop!* His lips still tingled from the kiss as he slipped on the cloak, then awkwardly clambered out of his open car window, to avoid opening and closing the door. He walked forward between the stilled cars, angry yells from motorists starting to merge into an excited cacophony accented by car horns. Harry saw another explosion and some green sparks. He started running flat out toward it, which was difficult, under the cloak, but he was very, very afraid that he knew what those green sparks were about...

A Death Eater whom Harry did not recognize from Voldemort's rebirthing (Voldemort had clearly been doing a lot of recruiting during the previous two years) was striding between the cars in a long cloak, hood up, pointing his wand at cars and sending sparks toward them. Harry heard him casually shouting "*Crucio!*" and then — then he heard the curse that *he'd* survived, and he started running again hoping against hope — but he was too late. A young man clutching the wheel of his car convulsed for a second, then just *stopped*, clearly dead. Harry was still a good thirty feet

away, but even as he ran forward, he pointed his wand at the Death Eater who'd killed the man before he could attack anyone else.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he cried as he ran. The wizard flew backward and hit a van, sliding down the side and slumping, unconscious, on the ground. His wand flew toward Harry; he let it bounce off him and fall to the ground, then walked over it to hide it and discreetly bent over, still covered by the cloak, and picked it up, pocketing it. He walked to the car where the young man sat and stood for a moment, staring at the dead driver, thinking of his own parents, seeing his mother dying again... A fury welled up inside him and he strode forward to where the three other Death Eaters were, levitating a family's car, with parents and children inside all terrified. None of these Death Eaters seemed to have noticed that their comrade was down; they were all enjoying themselves too much.

Harry's heart was in his throat; if he forced them to break the spell or disarmed any of them, the car could come crashing down with five people in it who could be gravely injured. He watched helplessly as the car floated in the air, hoping Katie would return with help soon. He remembered other Ministry employees having a similar problem at the Quidditch World Cup when a family was being levitated and they were worried about the Muggles crashing to earth and being injured...

He stood with his wand at the ready, watching with his heart in his throat. He felt certain he would hear the children's screams in his nightmares. Then, in the blink of an eye, the three Death Eaters flung the car through the air, where it landed on the opposite side of the motorway, facing oncoming traffic that was still moving. Don't people notice *anything*? he wondered for a moment, before noticing himself that a very large lorry was going to crash into the car, in which the family was obviously quite shaken, but thus far, still alive.

Unless the lorry flattened them all...

"*Wingardium leviosa!*" he cried with every bit of concentration he could muster (never having levitated anything so large and heavy before). The car went flying up into the air again and Harry held it there, shaking, sweat pouring down his face as he struggled to maintain its altitude. The lorry drove on through the space which the car had occupied, the car just barely above the top of the lorry, the driver of the lorry clearly amazed. Harry hoped the man wouldn't have an accident through sheer shock. Harry kept concentrating very hard, moving the car over in the air until it

was back above the proper side of the road, then lowering it carefully down to the ground.

Two of the Death Eaters looked shocked; the other one, however, looked around, saying in a very suspicious voice, "*Someone is here...* "

Harry realized, with a shock, that it was a woman. He pointed his wand at her. "*Stupefy!*" he cried. She promptly stiffened and fell, looking rather plank-like. The other Death Eaters needed no other inducement to depart, suddenly Disapparating with a double *pop!*

Damn! Harry thought. *I let them get away!* But then he remembered that he *had* caught two Death Eaters, one of them a murderer, which wasn't bad for someone who was all alone and not yet done with school. He strode to the woman he'd stunned and bent over her; her hood fell away from her face now, and he could see it clearly.

"Well, well, well", he said, more to himself than to her; he didn't think a stunned person could actually hear anything.

"Hello there, Rita."

* * *

When Katie finally returned, the first wizard Harry had disarmed had also needed to be stunned, as he was starting to come around. Katie had brought four Aurors and two Obliviators with her, and the Aurors brought a horseless carriage like the one they'd used to take Harry to the Ministry, into which they bundled Rita Skeeter and the Death Eater Harry had disarmed. Katie returned to the car, standing next to it and looking around, confused.

"Harry? Harry! Where are you? Are you all right?" He goosed her, making her jump. "Harry! Don't do that!" she scolded, but the scolding degenerated into a giggle very quickly. "Oh, you frightened me!"

"Not as much as those Death Eaters frightened the Muggles", he answered, still under the cloak. Up ahead, they could see that the Aurors were gone with their quarry — including Rita Skeeter herself — and the Obliviators were going car to car putting memory charms on people. They climbed into the car again (Harry still in his cloak) and Katie frowned in his general direction.

"Aren't you going to take the cloak off, Harry?"

"Frankly — no. I think it's safest if I'm not seen at all. Keep the blonde hair for now, too. You didn't tell the Ministry I was with you, did you?"

"No, I told them Death Eaters were attacking Muggles in their cars —"

"Good. I think — I think I agree with Sirius. The Ministry may not be completely secure. Tell them as little as possible at all times."

She frowned as she started the car. "I'm going to be *working* for the Ministry, Harry, remember? When I'm done my Auror training. Are you going to feel the same way then? About telling me things? Not that you've been completely forthcoming about some information —"

Now Harry knew how Hermione felt about being harangued about keeping the Time Turner secret. "I was told to keep my Animagus training to myself, and that I didn't have to register until after I'm done with school. We've only been seeing each other for a month. What, was I supposed to transfigure myself on our first date and scare you witless?"

"No, evidently you were supposed to break the law and use *my wand* to do magic out of school on our first date", she responded grumpily as the traffic started to move again.

Harry sat back silently. They drove to Birmingham without saying two words to each other; he'd been feeling very excited about catching Rita, too, and now there was a pall on everything thanks to their disagreement. He remembered that in his other life, Severus Snape wasn't keen on the idea of being married to an Auror. He turned to look at Katie; he was uncertain how he felt about continuing to have a girlfriend who was planning to be an Auror, if she was going to trust a possibly corrupt wizarding government unconditionally.

They had their tea in a pub in Birmingham, Harry still under the cloak. Katie was very cross about appearing to be eating alone, and ordering quite a lot (Harry was very hungry). Soon after five-thirty, they left for London, reaching Katie's flat by seven-thirty. When they were finally in the flat, Harry pulled off his cloak just as Sam walked into the living room from the kitchen.

"Aaaah!" he screamed, when Harry appeared from nowhere.

"Aaaah!" Harry screamed in response.

"Don't *do* that, Harry!" Sam yelled at him, catching his breath. Then he looked down at the silvery cloak in Harry's hand. "Oh — you didn't Apparate —"

"No, I haven't learned yet. It's an Invisibility Cloak. Safety precaution."

Sam nodded. "I remember Lily said James had one of those; she borrowed it once or twice for work. Good idea."

Harry was still getting his breath. "Thanks." Katie went to call Mrs. Figg to tell her they were back at the flat, then called Draco on the fireplace to tell him Mrs. Figg was on her way. Then, just as she was turning from the fireplace, Draco Malfoy suddenly appeared in the middle of the living room with a *pop!* that made Katie shriek and almost sent Harry tumbling backwards over an ottoman.

"Malfoy!" Harry yelled at him, trying to maintain his balance.

Katie glared at him, looking like she was going to hex him good. "Draco Malfoy! How did you know where to Apparate? I didn't tell you where I live!"

He smirked at her. "No, but I've been here before. Your dad brought me, last summer, before we went to see his bloke in Diagon Alley for the tattoos. I can't believe you", he said, laughing and shaking his head. "You were so bent on *blindfolding* me to take me out to Figg's car. I didn't feel like telling you back at the castle that that would be pointless. It was completely worth it to see the look on your —" Now he stopped and really looked at her, his grin growing more lopsided by the moment.

"Hey — I like what you've done with your hair —"

"Malfoy!" Harry yelled. Draco Malfoy rolled his eyes. Sam stepped between them.

"Why don't we all sit and have something cold to drink?" he suggested. He fetched some Cokes from the kitchen and a beer for himself and they sat in the living room while waiting for Mrs. Figg. Katie and Harry told them about the Death Eaters and that one of them was Rita Skeeter.

Draco Malfoy whistled between his teeth. "So — maybe we'll find out if she really is Daisy Furuncle", he said, raising his eyebrows. Harry eyed him suspiciously.

"Yeah — maybe we will —"

The doorbell rang; it was Mrs. Figg, come to fetch Draco. They all went downstairs to see him off. Before he walked out the door of Sam and Katie's building he turned to Harry unexpectedly and said, "Oh, and Harry — I'm — I'm sorry I was getting on you for Ginny saving you and everything. I — I didn't realize what was going on at first —"

Harry could tell it wasn't easy for him to say it; he wondered whether Ginny had ordered him to do it. "It's all right, Draco", he said, forcing

himself to also use the first name.

"Pity they have a pool instead of an enchanted lake, like at Hogwarts. I mean, at Hogwarts, if you fall in the lake, all you have to do is manage to get one of the enchanted creatures in there to touch you and you can breath under the water —"

"What?" Harry said, frowning. "What are you talking about?" But then he remembered that Dennis Creevey had been pushed back into the boat by the giant squid, and that Ginny had been underwater for an abnormally long period of time when he'd gone under the lake to battle the hybrid basilisk.

"You know. The enchanted creatures down there. Mermaids, the squid, all that. I heard they had to order them all to leave you and the other champions alone, not to help you, during the Tournament. That's their usual instinct. Except for the ones they wanted to attack you, like the Grindylows. It wouldn't have been much of a contest if the merpeople had been helping all of you, would it? Don't you know anything?"

Harry frowned, remembering Malfoy's father being so disdainful that Harry, Ron and Hermione hadn't known about the significance of the Westminster tube station. He restrained himself from retorting, gritting his teeth instead and saying, "I'll see you at the wedding later this month. Say hello to Aberforth and the lads for me."

Malfoy laughed and shook his head. "Thought I'd get you to take the bait that time. Oh well. Back to Figg's smelly old house..."

And climbed behind the wheel of the car (Mrs. Figg had moved over), slammed the door shut, and with a wave to Sam, he was gone.

* * *

Harry was able to spend the next few days with Ron and Hermione at Ascog castle, and it almost felt like when they were younger and their hormones hadn't started to get in the way of their friendship. Harry and Hermione told Ron about St. Mungo's; Harry told Ron and Hermione about the trip to London, and capturing Rita Skeeter. Hermione in particular listened avidly to his story about Rita. There was no love lost there.

"Sirius says she doesn't deny that she was a double agent, and she's threatening to take down Dumbledore's organization, revealing that he had operatives working for him who did things that were outside the law. So far the Ministry seems to have just shrugged its collective shoulders about

this. I mean, I don't think the Ministry is worried about that sort of thing right now as long as the operatives are bringing Death Eaters under control, you know? Before the Diagon Alley attack, it might have been different, but now..."

Hermione swallowed, and Harry thought she was perhaps remembering their trip to St. Mungo's; she looked at Ron and laced her fingers through his. He gazed back at her both lovingly and desperately and Harry realized it was his cue to give them some privacy. He made jokes and pretended to feel put-out, but as he walked down the stairs from the roof garden, where they'd been sitting, he had a grin on his face. At least they might have a chance to be happy, he thought.

Ron told him that Hermione had shown him her Animagus form briefly and that she would be going to North America while they were at Hogwarts for the Quidditch match they'd planned to attend. Harry tried to pry out of him what her animal was, to no avail; Ron had been grinning the whole time, shaking his head and sometimes laughing outright at Harry's suggestions.

"A stoat! She's *not* going to be a bloody *stoat*."

"Erm — falcon."

Ron made a face. "Our Hermione, a bird of any sort? Yeah — she *loves* heights, does Hermione. *That's* really going to happen..."

Just before Hermione was scheduled to take a Portkey back to Greenwich the next day, she stood on the landing outside her room with her bags, waiting to say goodbye to Harry and Ron. She hugged Harry soundly, and he held her closely, so glad they were all right again, cherishing the memories of the previous days they'd spent together, the three of them, just like it used to be (mostly). Then she turned to Ron, with that *look* in her eyes which Harry had first seen in the forest, not long before Ron was bitten. She slid her arms up around Ron's neck and started to pull his face down to hers, but Ron stopped just short of her lips and looked at Harry.

"Er, do you *have* to keep standing there, Harry?"

Hermione put her hand on his cheek and turned his attention back to her. "I don't care who sees us..." she whispered, and he finally let himself be pulled down to her. Harry saw him open his mouth and then she did the same. One of Ron's hands laced itself into her hair and the other circled her waist, pulling her very close to him. Suddenly, Harry was feeling that

perhaps he *should* have made himself scarce. He remembered the way she kissed...

It was Ron who broke the kiss, having turned a red deep enough to compete with his hair. "See you soon", he said raspily to her, as though he didn't quite have his breath back. "We're all going to meet up in Diagon Alley. On the wireless they say most of the shops should be rebuilt in another week."

Hermione grinned. "I should be back by then", she said merrily, her eyes sliding over to Harry, who threw his hands up in frustration.

"Oh, *come on*. Tell me! I'll keep it a secret —"

"No, no! I shouldn't have shown Ron, but I couldn't resist —"

Harry couldn't help the lascivious grin that crept across his face. "What *else* did you show Ron while I was gone...?"

She swatted his arm. "Oh, you! Filthy, filthy mind —"

But she was laughing, and gave each of them an additional hug before picking up her bags, then the old empty ginger beer can which was her Portkey. At the precise time the Portkey was to take effect, sure enough, she disappeared utterly, like a light that winked out, and Ron and Harry were left on the landing, just the two of them. Ron sighed, looking at the empty space where she'd been just moments before, and Harry slung his arm across his best friend's shoulders and offered to let him beat him at chess.

* * *

After Ron went back to the Burrow, Harry learned about the usual rhythms of life at Ascog Castle. He played with Orion, Leo and Mercy (who was frightfully good at chess, but sometimes not as good as she *thought* she was), and sometimes read to them at bedtime. He grew better acquainted with Ursula and Alan, and with Sirius' parents; and he learned to walk wide circles around Cass and Floyd, especially when they'd just returned home from their jobs with piles of work to do overnight. Harry never saw Cass smile, and he could swear Floyd was scowling at him every time he happened to meet his gaze.

He put to good use some of the things Ginny had taught him, swimming in the underground pool — but only when someone else was around. Sirius and Ursula and Alan would join him down there after the children were in bed, and the four of them laughed and talked and splashed about in the pool, Harry feeling almost like they accepted him as not only

a member of the household, but as another adult. It was suddenly like having two older brothers and an older sister, a strange sensation for Harry, after being the eldest son in his other life.

The Quidditch match at Hogwarts was three days before the full moon; Harry and Ron were going to Hog's End the night before the match, staying over, then walking up to the castle early the next morning. Sirius did not want him to go; he was worried about Harry's safety, especially after the trip back to London.

When the time came for him to go to Hogsmeade, Harry bade Sirius farewell, and Sirius again tried to convince him not to go.

"Harry, when you were driving down to London with Katie, you ran into Death Eaters and could have been killed! Now you're going to be sitting in the Quidditch stadium at Hogwarts with a thousand other people. You don't think Voldemort will think a match at Hogwarts is a prime opportunity, either to go after you specifically or just a large crowd?"

"Sirius — the Ministry has so many security precautions planned it's not funny. And you can't Apparate or Disapparate anywhere on the Hogwarts grounds anyway. They're even considering moving more of the professional matches there and running additional trains to the village to bring spectators. It's safer than anywhere else in Britain for watching Quidditch."

Sirius frowned. "I don't know — I have loads of things to do or I'd come with you, just to be sure —"

"Sirius, it's safe as houses. Trust me. Stop worrying. Oh, by the way — is there any news about Rita Skeeter? Or the bank?"

Sirius sighed. "No and no. You can't see inside the bank and there's been no word. Complete and utter silence. And I can't help but think that it's too bad she wasn't really on our side; she'd be the perfect person to infiltrate it. Sometimes I wish I'd chosen an animal a bit smaller, so I could do things like that..."

Harry nodded. "Me too. What about the Rita and Daisy thing?"

Sirius snorted. "She claims she knows nothing about it, and that in fact whoever is doing it is imitating her without crediting her. She reckons the name is a dig at her as well. Her full first name is Marguerite, which is another name for a daisy. And a `skeeter', or mosquito, is also a pest, or an annoyance. A `furuncle' is kind of a boil, also an annoyance in its way. On

the other hand, she says she *loves* the Daisy articles, so I'm not sure whether to believe her..."

Harry sighed. "And why hasn't *she* been given Veritaserum?"

Sirius drew his lips into a line. "You have to understand, Harry; that Potion isn't universally accepted as a way to get the truth out of someone. It's not standard procedure or anything. And technically, Rita's not going to be charged with much. There's very little hard evidence against her at all. She's mostly been a spy for the other side, and while spying will get her a sentence, it won't get her *much* of a sentence. Not compared to someone who's done the Unforgivable Curses."

This was starting to depress Harry; then he remembered what Sirius had said about having loads to do. "What do you have to do, precisely?"

Sirius gave a small smile and put his finger to the side of his nose. "Top secret. Which means I'll fill you in after the fact." Then his smile grew into a grin. "Oh, I suppose there's no harm... Snape and I have some undercover work to do. We're looking into where Annie Weasley has been all these years. Maggie's family is back, they've learned she's a witch, and they've put us onto the agency through which they adopted her. Place in Exeter. But to look into it, we have to appear to be respectable Muggles. You know the drill."

Harry grinned. "So you might find Annie!"

Sirius nodded. "Hope so. It would be nice if *something* went our way for once. It starting to feel like Voldemort and his people are just pecking, pecking away at us. First it's one thing, then another... Anyway, wish us luck."

Harry did, wholeheartedly, before throwing some Floo powder into the fire in the sitting room and saying loudly, "Hog's End!" It seemed very strange to be saying the name of what he considered to be his own house, but he didn't have time to think about this; soon he was whirling through the many fires of the Floo network, and he once again stumbled when he emerged from the fire.

He almost turned around and went back to Ascog. Ginny was standing in the entrance hall of Hog's End, her hands on her hips, glaring at Ron. The pair of them hadn't noticed his arrival. They were too absorbed in their argument.

"I *told* you I was coming to the match. Why do you have to be so —"

"Yeah, and I suppose that means that *Malfoy* will be here, too, trying to sneak into your room at night. Do you know how many locking charms I had to put on the guest room door at Ascog to keep him from going out at night? And how many bad jokes I had to hear about me wanting him all to myself? I want him all to myself, all right, so I can pound him into the ground..."

"I certainly didn't make any arrangements to meet him at night, so don't look at *me* that way."

"Right. I'm supposed to believe that? You're not a little girl anymore, Ginny. Others have noticed. Why haven't you?"

"I haven't done anything of which to be ashamed, Ronald Weasley. Draco —"

"Hasn't *once* pressured you to sleep with him? Come on, Ginny. I think I know that snake a little better than *that*."

Sandy hissed to Harry, "*I believe he is using 'snake' in a derogatory manner again...*"

Harry hushed her. Neither Weasley noticed the hissing.

"Why are you still with him, anyway? Just because he put his dad in prison? Sometimes you're as bad as Hermione. Can't ever admit you're wrong. Just get it over with and break up with —"

"*Ahem!*" Harry said loudly now, hoping to keep Ron from finishing what he was saying. *That's the last thing we all need*, he thought. Something about Ron being *right*, and ordering you to do something, just made you want to be contrary and do the opposite thing. *Hasn't he learned his lesson?* Harry thought. *After he told me to break up with Hermione we were together for another eight months.* Ron could see what was wrong and what was right, but he couldn't translate that into convincing others. When it came to that he was completely incompetent. Harry hoped Ron wasn't planning to go to work in sales for Percy and the twins. If he did, Harry reckoned they'd be out of business in no more than a week.

Ron and Ginny looked at Harry, both turning red. Harry stepped toward them, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Ginny's made it very clear many times that she wants to be with Draco Malfoy, Ron. We should all respect her wishes." His eyes were locked with hers while he said this, feeling hollow inside. Ginny suddenly looked very open and vulnerable.

Now it was Ron who cleared his throat. "Well, all I know is I wasn't expecting to have to put up with that prat again already. I just wanted to see a Quidditch match, and —"

"He's not coming!" Ginny burst out suddenly, her voice very sharp. She tore her eyes away from Harry's and glared at her brother again. He glared right back.

"He's in Surrey", she continued. "We probably won't be able to see each other again until Alicia's wedding. Are you happy?"

Ron looked confused for a moment, then blustered, "Well, yeah. I guess I am. But — but why do you get the *best* room? Every time —"

"If you want your pick of the guest rooms, Ron, you should be better organized so you can leave sooner. I was here first and I claimed my room. You and Harry can decide who's getting which of the other two. No — I take that back. I'll take Harry up to the *other* nice room, and you can take what's left. That's what you get for being so *annoying*. Come on, Harry. I'll show you where to put your things."

She turned from both of them and started marching purposefully up the broad stairs. Harry followed, carrying his bag. He turned to glance at Ron for a second; Ron was scowling.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Ginny turned right and Harry followed her. She opened a heavy oak door; Harry hesitated, then crossed the threshold. He swallowed, looking around.

Jamie's room.

He bit his lip to keep from crying, thinking of the years he and Jamie had played in here, and in his room as well. The four-poster bed was exactly where his sister's used to be, and the diamond-paned window looking out over the garden was the same as ever, as was the massive carved wooden mantelpiece and overmantel.

"Harry — are you all right?" Ginny said softly.

He turned to her, trying to compose himself again. "Of course", he said in a voice he wished didn't sound so strangled. "I'm fine", he added, his voice closer to normal now. She nodded uncertainly.

"G — good. You just seemed — odd."

He forced a laugh. "And that's different *how*?"

Now she laughed too, and he tried not to be so glad to see that, but it was very hard. He sobered now and stepped toward her.

"I want you to know, Ginny. I'm — I'm trying to make my peace with you being with Malfoy." It was a lie, but he knew the truth would just antagonize her. And maybe if he repeated this particular lie enough times he'd come to believe it himself. She held onto the doorframe, meeting his gaze, unflinching.

"That's good", she whispered.

"I just want you to be happy", he said more softly, unable to take his eyes away from hers. "I think that's what Ron wants too. He's just — well, completely tactless about communicating that."

Ginny laughed and the spell was broken. "Truer words were never spoken. No one will *ever* confuse my brother for a diplomat." He laughed with her, but Harry thought, *That's why he's such a valuable friend.*

"I'm all right here. Why don't you break it to Ron that he's staying in the scullery?"

She flashed him another brilliant smile before she left, and when he was certain he was alone, he collapsed on the bed, his heart thudding painfully in his chest.

* * *

They had a raucous dinner at the Three Broomsticks with the other residents of Hog's End. It was good to see the twins and Percy again when they weren't trying to be on their `mum and dad' behavior. Harry was glad to see that Percy was loosening up, finally (for him). He actually laughed and joined in the conversation, and he didn't attempt to bore them all with the various bookkeeping woes of running a successful business.

When they returned to the house, they stayed up late playing charades and Exploding Snap and wizarding chess. It almost felt to Harry like the old days in the Gryffindor common room, except that Hermione wasn't sitting in the corner with piles of books while everyone around her was having fun. They all dragged themselves up to bed well after midnight, and Harry fell on his bed with his clothes on, asleep immediately.

He wasn't sure what time it was when he awoke; his candles were still burning, and he decided to get out of his hot jeans and sleep in his underwear as usual. Then, when he was about to return to the bed, he realized that he had to visit the loo. He dug his summer dressing gown out of his bag and tied it around his waist, padding barefoot down the corridor to the bath shared by the bedrooms at the end of the house closest to the top of the stairs.

He stopped and yawned hugely when he was in the corridor again, finally looking at his watch. It was after three in the morning. He dragged his feet back to his room, turning the doorknob, then thinking idly, *I didn't close the door all the way. I shouldn't have to turn the knob.*

As soon as he was in the room, he saw the way the moonlight was shining in the bay window, over the window seat, and he walked to it as though mesmerized. He sat down on the window seat where he'd spent many, many hours in his other childhood. He loved the way he could see down the High Street in one direction and over the fields in the other; it made him think of seeing both the future and the past from one vantage point. He lifted his face to the moonlight, bringing his feet up onto the cushion, hugging his legs to his chest and feeling more peaceful than he had in a long time.

"*Harry!*"

He whipped his head around. *Oh, that's right...* This was no longer his room. In the night, returning from the bathroom, his feet had automatically taken him here instead of to what he thought of as Jamie's room. Someone else had this room; then he saw the 'someone else' quite clearly, and his heart leapt into his throat.

Ginny was sitting up in the bed, which wasn't where his bed had been in his old life. He hadn't even noticed there *was* a bed when he'd entered; he'd gone straight for the bay window. The sheet was around her waist and he couldn't help noticing that she was sleeping in a *very* thin summer nightdress. His jaw worked soundlessly; he didn't know what to say.

"*Harry, what do you think you're doing in my room?*"

Arena

"*Harry, what do you think you're doing in my room?*"

Harry looked at her. Ginny was so pale in the moonlight that she seemed to glow from within. He swallowed. A million lies leapt to his tongue, but he couldn't bear to utter one of them. It had been so comforting to tell Snape about his other life, to show him the Pensieve. If he told Ginny about that life, would she believe him?

She clutched at the basilisk amulet on her breast, her eyes closed, and Harry remembered that he'd already told her that a time traveler had given him the second amulet. She had seemed to believe him at the time. Perhaps he could build on that — explain to her that *he* was the time traveler. That he had given it to *himself*.

He rose and started toward the bed, so he could sit closer to her, to tell her. That's all he had in mind, but her eyes flew open and she said urgently, "*Stop!*"

He froze. Putting up his hands defensively, he stuttered, "I — I wasn't trying anything. Honestly. I just didn't want to shout across the room —"

"I didn't think you were trying anything. It's just that —" She bit her lip, and Harry saw that she was still holding the amulet.

"You know that he can see you when he's touching the amulet", he said with surety. She nodded.

"Yes, so *don't come too close*. Or else he'll see you, too."

Harry frowned. Just after he'd almost drowned and Draco Malfoy had fallen down the stairs because of his Mark hurting, there was no time to consider the fact that Draco Malfoy had actually seen Ginny when he held the amulet — just as Harry had seen her. Did that mean he really loved her? he wondered. Could he love her and cheat on her at the same time?

"You're already holding onto *your* amulet; can't you see whether he's awake? Is it too dark in his room at Mrs. Figg's?"

She gazed at him as though he should know the answer to this. Harry waited, perplexed, and she finally said in a whisper, "*I don't see him when I hold the amulet, Harry.*"

The most difficult thing he had ever done was to *not* leap across the room and take her in his arms. He remembered that she had clutched at the

amulet and then discovered him in the en suite bathroom. *She had seen him.* But that didn't explain her reaction...

He swallowed and willed himself to have self-control. "This should be far enough", he said shakily, as he returned to the window seat. "Whenever I saw you, it was like a six-foot diameter bubble around you. It didn't reach farther than that."

She touched the amulet again and a smile blossomed on her face. "You — you saw me? When you held it? Really?"

He smiled warmly back at her. "Really."

She was looking at him the way she had after she'd revived him, and his heart skipped a beat. *Why is she still with Malfoy?* She doesn't see him when she holds the amulet, and she does see *me*. And she knows what that means. So —

"Why are you in my room, Harry? You didn't answer me."

Oh, right, he remembered. *My other life.*

"W-well, Ginny, what I have to tell you may sound pretty far-fetched. But it's all true. Do you remember when I tried to give you the amulet last Christmas and I told you it was from a time traveler?"

She answered slowly. "Yes —"

He took a deep breath; it was now or never. "Well — I was that time traveler."

She looked at him blankly, very still, very quiet. Finally she said, "I'm afraid I don't understand."

He took another deep breath then and explained that he'd been having nightmares during the previous summer, and didn't get a proper night's sleep for about two months. He told her about Voldemort putting the *Tempus Fugit* spell on him at King's Cross, about being taken to Godric's Hollow and doing the *Tempus Bonae Voluntatis* spell, traveling back in time to the night his parents were killed.

Her jaw dropped. "Harry! How *could* you?"

He hit his brow repeatedly with his fist and leaned over where he sat, his head in his hands. "I know, *I know*. So stupid! But — but he told me something before I did. I wasn't even sure whether he was lying. He could have done, I suppose. But somehow — something told me he wasn't..."

Softly, he told Ginny about his mother being pregnant when she died, about the sister who had never been born. She covered her mouth in horror,

her eyes glistening. He described his parents in the cozy cottage, how wonderful it was to see them.

"And when he was about to kill her", he told Ginny, "I — I just couldn't let him. The first time, anyway."

She uncovered her mouth. "What do you mean, *the first time*?"

"Well, the first time, I — I convinced my mother to save herself and me", he explained. He couldn't bear to tell her he'd used Imperius.

"With a spell", she said quietly. It wasn't a question. He nodded sheepishly. Perhaps he *could* tell her.

"It was —"

"No." She'd put her hand up to stop him. "I — I think I know what spell you're talking about. Don't tell me, and I can truthfully say you didn't." Harry nodded; she had guessed, and she wasn't screaming at him, telling him what an awful person he was. She was trying to protect *him* instead.

"Well", he went on, "I didn't actually get that memory in my head until months later, in May, after I fixed the timelines. The only memory I had of that until then was a memory of the second time. The second time, I was taken into the trees near the house well before Voldemort arrived to kill my parents."

"Taken? By whom?"

"By me."

She frowned. "I hate to say this again — but I don't understand."

"I was stunned and taken into the trees by *me*; a me who had come from the future, but not *this* future; a different future that I had created by saving my mother the first time. That's why it was the second time. The me who had traveled back in time to *stop* me from changing time had been the one to do it the first time. I — he — I — oh, bother! — *I* saved my mother by — by convincing her to plead for my life and hers. That time, she did what Voldemort wanted and promised to raise me as his servant. He put an Obedience Charm on me —"

"You too!" she exclaimed.

"— and he left. Then I traveled forward in time again, back to the first of September. But it was a very, very different first of September. It was a world where my mother hadn't been killed by Voldemort, and a world where he hadn't tried and failed to kill me, losing his power."

"He had never fallen", she said in awe.

Harry was grim. "It was terrible. The world was terrible. Well — not all of it. I finally had almost everything I'd ever wanted. I had a family — a *real* family. Mother, stepfather, sister, half-brothers — And we lived *here*. At Hog's End. This was *my* room. I lived here for over ten years." He could see that she understood now. She looked around at the large, gracious room. "I really wasn't trying anything when I came in here. I had been to the loo, and when I came back, it was just — force of habit. You had put me in what I thought of as Jamie's room."

"Jamie?"

"My sister."

He saw her swallow. "Oh", was all she said, staring at him. He went on.

"So suddenly, I had this life with everything I'd ever wanted. But the price was that it was a world where Voldemort had never fallen. Well, that wasn't the only price; I also had to serve him. I was initiated as a Death Eater, and then told to — to do something —"

"A *Death Eater*!" He nodded. "What — what were you told to do?" she whispered, as though she didn't quite want to find out.

He could barely get the words out. "I was told to kill Ron."

Her mouth was wide open in an 'O'. "He told you to kill your *best friend*?"

Harry shook his head. "Ron wasn't my best friend. We — we didn't get on at all. After all, he was in Gryffindor and I was in Slytherin."

He had thought she looked shocked before, but now —

"*Slytherin*!"

"Well, my dad was the head-of-house —"

"Dad? You said you had a stepfather. So did your father live, too? Did your mother and father split up and then she remarried?"

"No, no; my father was killed by Voldemort just like before. My mother remarried when I was three-and-a-half. I always called my stepfather Dad."

He could see her mind working furiously, her brow furrowed; when she looked up at him her eyes were very round. "Harry — was your stepfather — *Professor Snape*?"

He smiled at her reaction; he wasn't sure he'd ever seen her look so shocked. "When I first realized that he was — well, I can't even begin to tell you everything that was going through my head. But he was actually a really good dad. I got used to him being my dad pretty quickly. Maybe it

was because my mum... well. That can wait. Anyway, my best friend's name was earlier in the alphabet than mine, and he'd already been sorted into Slytherin. When my turn came to be sorted I asked to be put into Slytherin — and I was."

"You *asked*?"

He shrugged. "In this life I asked *not* to be in Slytherin, and the Hat put me into Gryffindor. I knew most people are just put into one house or the other, but both times I was sorted, it gave me a choice. My sister said she was given a choice, too."

"You said your best friend was already in Slytherin. Who was it?"

He looked at her steadily, a very clear picture forming in his mind of the boy in his other life who had been his friend for over ten years.

"Draco Malfoy." Her gasp erupted in the quiet room like an explosion. He explained to her that his mother and Snape had been 'befriended' by the Malfoys — the other family whose son was in the Prophecy — and he and Draco had grown up together, along with Jamie. He told her how the three of them were never apart, and how Draco and Jamie had fallen in love. And how he and Draco were initiated together. She merely nodded at that.

"Well, he didn't have different parents, did he?"

"But in *that* life, he was told to kill someone."

"Who was he told to kill?" she asked shakily.

He gazed at her steadily again. "You."

She had no words. Her jaw opened and closed soundlessly. He explained the Muggle-born ban to her, and the General Strike, which had led to her and Ron being targeted, which in turn led to his mother deciding that she knew how to get around the Obedience Charm.

"So", she said softly, "she was going to kill the two of us so you and Draco wouldn't have to?"

He shook his head. "Just Ron. She wasn't concerned about Draco. But — I couldn't let her. I *didn't* let her. I — I disarmed her —"

Unbidden, the tears cascaded down his face as he looked into the night sky, remembering his mother flying backward, remembering the sound when she struck the cave wall and the sight of her still, crumpled body on the ground.

"It killed her. *I* killed her", he said simply, turning his face back to Ginny's, which he saw was also wet with tears. He so wanted to be holding

her, crying out his heart; it was agony to stay where he was. "I was convicted at trial and sentenced to five years in Azkaban."

"*Azkaban!*" she said in a fearful whisper. "So that's — that's how you *knew*..." He nodded to her, knowing that she was talking about when they'd been in the sitting room at Ascog, and Harry had voiced his fears to them all about the dementors leaving Azkaban.

"And then — I had a letter. A letter telling me that you and Jamie had both been murdered. I — I couldn't stay where I was. I knew that world was wrong, for so many reasons, and I had to do something to fix it. I escaped, the same way Sirius had, using my Animagus abilities."

"So — you changed the timelines back because your sister died?"

He swallowed. "And — and you. When I managed to — to find my way back to this life, I was so glad to see you —"

She gasped. "That's when you came running into my dorm and — and —"

"Yes."

He remembered holding her tightly, kissing her, the way she had clung to him and kissed him back before coming to her senses...

"Harry — you said that you had had a dream — a very *real* dream. You said that I died in your dream. That — that *wasn't* a dream, was it?" He shook his head, gazing longingly at her. "Harry", she whispered now; "what was I to you in that life?"

He couldn't hide his feelings from her any longer; his face showing all of his love, and she knew, *she knew*...

"Do you even have to ask?" he choked. They were both crying freely now; she was a blur to him, but he could hear her sniffing.

"Harry", she said in a thick voice, "in that life, was — was it *Draco* who killed me?"

He swallowed. "No, Ginny. He — he sacrificed himself to save us all", he told her. He explained about the diary, and Draco not wanting to be part of the time change, so he wouldn't remember Jamie.

"He *did* that?"

"If he hadn't —" Harry pushed his glasses up and wiped the tears from his face, not wanting to think of what the world would have been like if he hadn't been able to fix the timelines. He didn't even tell her about the changes in the Muggle world, the wars...

She sat up straighter, wiping her own tears, and looking hopeful. "Do you think — do you think he would do that in this time? I mean — I don't want him to die. I just wonder — the Obedience Charm —"

He shrugged. "I really don't know, Gin. He was so different in so many ways. He and Jamie and I grew up together. He would do anything for me. But — it's just not the same in this life. *He's* not the same."

She sat back against her pillows now, fingering the amulet. "He frightens me so", she whispered. "Sometimes. Not all the time. I — I wonder how much longer I can stand being with him. Oh, Harry, I wish he wasn't in that damn Prophecy!"

Harry gaped at her. "What are you *saying*, Ginny?"

She sighed. "You've been completely open and honest with me, Harry, and — I haven't been with you. But I *want* to be. I feel so tired. So utterly *tired*. Acting all the time like I'm so in love with him. Yes, I had feelings for him at one time. I'd convinced myself that you were never going to give me the time of day and I needed to get on with my life. Draco and I became friends. And then more than friends. And *then* we became caught up in the plan to trap his father." She covered her face with her hands. "I'm so ashamed of what I did in the Potions Dungeon, when you and Ron found me. But — but I'm so glad you found me when you did. I — I was half-afraid he was going to try to make it far more realistic than we had discussed. Oh, Harry! I was so glad to see you and Ron —"

He recalled how *real* her shivering had been, and the way she had clung to him when he'd carried her up to the infirmary. Later, he had felt inclined to agree with Malfoy that she was quite the actress. Now it seemed she had been doing far less acting than they'd originally suspected.

"And later, of course, I had to put a good face on it. When he was trying to be sweet, he *could* be very sweet, and I tried to forget about the dungeon and tell myself that *he'd* been acting, too.

"But the longer I've been with him, the less right it feels. He keeps *pressuring* me. You know. And sometimes I think he might — might — *snap*. So many times I've cried myself to sleep at night, wishing I hadn't given up on you. But I had to make out in public that I was happy, that we were the model couple."

"Why?"

"Well, at first it was because of his father. And then I realized that it was far better to have him on our side. You know what they say: Keep your

friends close —"

"— and your enemies closer", he finished, watching her.

"Exactly. And then — then you took me flying for the first time", she whispered. "And I — I couldn't not do that again. Spending time with you was so *wonderful*. I thought — at least we can be together as friends. I really thought we could, that I could prevent the old feelings from coming back... But it was so *hard* to be with you, and talk with you, and fly with you, and to see that you had feelings for me... and then not admit that I felt the same way... Plus I had Hermione to think of... But the day you saved me from the Lethifold, I couldn't stand it any more, and I gave in..."

Harry remembered the way she had seemed to abandon all of her reserve when she kissed him back — and what an effort it was for her to separate herself from him and to tell him she would no longer meet him on top of the Astronomy Tower. "But — I couldn't break up with him —"

"Why not?"

"Harry! What do you think he'd do if I did that? I don't mean to me — somehow I don't get the impression he would try to hurt *me*. It's you I've been worried about. You *know* he'd blame *you*. And now that we know about the Obedience Charm, it's a very good thing I didn't break up with him, isn't it? I mean — he's like — like —"

"A ticking bomb", Harry said.

"That'll do, I suppose", she conceded. "We certainly don't want him to change sides, Harry. Think of everything he knows now! He knows about you being a Golden Griffin Animagus, about your Invisibility Cloak, about your aunt having magical abilities —"

"He knows where Katie lives and he didn't tell her, and now she's going to train to be an Auror —"

"*Good Lord*", she breathed.

Harry looked at her desperately. "This is all my fault. This is worse than Hermione being with Viktor Krum — and I say that even now that I know Viktor was Voldemort's heir. It's my fault. I-I treated you like some kind of carrot to dangle in front to him, and now —"

"Harry!" she interrupted him. "I did that *willingly*. No one pushed me into it. And I thought — I thought he might truly change. I thought that if he wasn't under his father's influence, he might be different." Harry thought how different he was after ten years with him and Jamie. "He really didn't seem enthusiastic about being a Death Eater, after all. And I

admit — I was rather attracted to him. And he was attracted to me. I wasn't supposed to be thinking of you — you were with Hermione. He was even making an effort to get along with my family. I thought — All right. I can get over Harry and be happy with Draco..."

Harry scrutinized her. "What went wrong?"

She sighed. "I *didn't* get over you, that's what went wrong. And Draco kept accusing me at every turn of still having feelings for you — which didn't exactly endear him to me. It was a bit of a vicious cycle. Not that I could let any of that show in public... He started to *do* things. He'd ogle other girls right in front of me to get a rise out of me. And I have to admit — he got to me at first. I don't *enjoy* being humiliated." Harry shook his head, restraining himself from saying what he really thought. "And then — there was the incessant pressure to sleep with him —"

"Oh, Ginny. That must have been awful, him trying to make you do something you didn't want to do —"

"What? Oh, right. Well, yes — as I said, it started off that way — " She started playing with the sheet with her fingers, plucking at it nervously, not looking at him.

He frowned. "What are you saying? I thought you didn't want to sleep with him?" His voice shook.

"Well", her voice was shaking now as well, "not as such. And I certainly didn't when I was only fifteen. Some girls are ready at that point, but I wasn't, and he just didn't respect that at all. But — but I'm older now. And sometimes... Let me put it this way. When I got hacked off at Katie for telling me Draco had been cheating on me, I'd — I'd just been upstairs with him, and we were, um, let's just call it *snogging*..."

Harry tried not to feel aroused by her telling him this. She was blushing in the dim light that was starting to permeate the sky; they'd been talking for some time.

"I'd had the thought before that I — well, that what would be the harm in finally giving in? I had very nearly given in at the end of the term, when I received my O.W.L. results — well, to be honest — I was so excited about my results, I practically attacked *him*. If Professor Sprout hadn't interrupted us —"

"I know."

"Oh, that's right. Well — technically, he *is* my boyfriend. I'm just a flesh and blood human being, and he can — he can be *very* persuasive."

She was blushing even more deeply. "But that day at Ascog — I touched the amulet and saw you kissing Katie. And I felt like I wanted to *die*. It was one thing to see the two of you in bed together, just lying there; to actually see you *doing* something, looking like — like you *desired* her so utterly... I remembered that I was trying to get him to be fed up with me and leave me, and *that* wasn't very likely to happen if I slept with him. I put him off again and told him I wasn't ready —"

"Which was a lie", Harry said softly. "You haven't slept with him because you're hoping that will make him leave you."

"Yes, it was a lie! I'm not made of stone, you know. And he was — oh, I don't want to get into it. I'm sorry I was so cross with Katie. But — but I was feeling *very* frustrated having to stop Draco yet again, and cross with myself for not *wanting* to stop him, since I didn't really care for him and it was just a physical thing, and I'd seen you *kissing* her, and *then* Katie was basically shredding my plans by telling me Draco was an unfaithful cad... Did she think I was *stupid*? Of *course* he's an unfaithful cad. *I know that*. He's *Draco Malfoy*. Good heavens, he was sneaking around with Mariah all last year!"

"You know about that too?"

She raised her eyebrows at him. "*You* know about that?"

He felt very, very small. She continued, "My dilemma is — I've got to convince *him* to be the one to break up with *me*, or there'll be hell to pay all round. Luckily, that sneak had already tried to cover his tracks with a letter — which I knew was a pack of lies the moment I read it — and so I had something I could wave in Katie's face."

"Why were you attacking *me*, then? When you saw I was in the bath, I mean."

She looked at him levelly now. "Because I knew that meant that *you* knew he'd been cheating on me. I — I thought better of you, Harry. I would have thought *you* would tell me such a thing, not leave it to Katie. Plus, I hate to say it again, but — but I'd seen you two kissing. Not to mention the image of the two of you in bed at the pub was rather fresh in my mind. That day I was this close —" she held up her thumb and forefinger barely a half-inch apart "— to declaring I would never have anything to do with another man for the rest of my life. I didn't realize you *also* knew about Mariah."

She hugged her knees to her chest, the sheet covering most of her, and Harry felt deeply ashamed. She had thought he was as bad as Malfoy. *Men. Sticking together to protect each other's right to unlimited shagging.*

"I'm so sorry, Ginny. I — I thought you really cared for him and I didn't want to hurt you. And I didn't think you'd believe me anyway. I reckoned you'd think I was trying to get you to leave Malfoy again."

She nodded. "Well, you were probably right about that. Except that I really *would* have believed just about anything you told me he was capable of, all the while lying to you and claiming that I didn't believe a word you said, to maintain the façade." She sighed. "I'm sorry, Harry. It seemed — more prudent. If I'd been honest with you, we — we might have been tempted to *do* something, and we probably would have been discovered by him... I thought it fairer to you to let you get on with your life. My current problem is — since he's cheating on me now, I can't very well expect him to get frustrated with *me* for not sleeping with *him*. Why's he going to bother breaking up with me if he's shagging other girls, and still thinks I might give in any day now? And I can't get all huffy about him shagging the other girls and break up with him, because he's under that Obedience Charm. We don't want him Apparating to You-Know-Who's side the next time he's summoned and doing whatever he's told, do we?"

She sighed and tightened her arms around her legs. "So I've got a boyfriend I don't want, who's getting *far* too good at very nearly seducing me —" Her voice shook and so did her hand, as it pushed a lock of hair behind her ear; "— and if I show him the door it's liable to get us all killed. *And* if my frustration gets the better of me and I give in, I'll *never* be rid of him... besides feeling terribly, terribly *guilty*."

She would feel guilty because of me, Harry thought. She was sacrificing any happiness she might have in her youth to protect others — mostly to protect *him*. This was the last thing he had expected to hear. Everything he had heard and seen that had passed between her and Draco Malfoy during the previous year had been a lie; well, *almost* everything, he thought, remembering overhearing their argument on Malfoy's birthday. That had been an unguarded moment, in private. And even then — Ginny wasn't being completely honest with Draco about not wanting to sleep with him. She *did* desire him, against her will, but she felt dirty and guilty about that and claimed to him that she wasn't "ready" so that he might eventually decide to leave her.

"Why", his voice shook, "would you feel guilty about sleeping with your boyfriend?" He thought he knew, but he wanted to hear it from her again. He could never tire of hearing it...

"Well, there are two reasons. First, there's you, of course. Second —" She paused and bit her lip. "He loves me."

"What?"

She sighed. "The amulet, remember? It's very clear that in his own Draco Malfoy sort of way, he *does* actually love me. And I don't feel the same. I may have once, not as strongly as him, but I certainly don't any more. He loves me and I don't love him back. It's you I love. If that's not a good reason to feel guilty, I don't know what is. And even though I love you, we can't be together... we can't even *sit* closer together than this... Not while I'm the one he sees in that damn amulet. Not while Voldemort can use him to kill and destroy."

"Ginny", he said throatily, feeling like she was a million miles away instead of a mere ten feet. "How do you expect me to go on after you tell me you love me, but we can't be together? Why didn't you tell me when I told you I love you?"

She looked at him sadly. "I couldn't, Harry. I just couldn't. If I left Draco for you he *would* kill you. I know it. Every time I considered running to you and confessing my feelings, all I could picture in my mind was — was the way Hermione and Colin and Penelope looked when I was in first year and my selfishness was getting people hurt. I don't ever want people to be hurt again because of my selfishness, my greediness. That's what led to it. I was greedy; I *needed* to talk to Tom, to talk to *someone*. And even after Mrs. Norris, I kept on, didn't I? And I killed the roosters, and even Nearly Headless Nick was affected... And it was all because of me. When I finally worked out what was making me do it... I don't know how many hours I sat in the hospital wing crying over the three of them... I never want to feel that way again, Harry. And maybe that's a kind of selfishness, too. But that's a kind of selfishness I can live with. And a kind that other people can live with too."

"But — but — you're telling me now", he whispered.

She gazed at him longingly and he caught his breath. She was so beautiful, sitting there with her hair tumbling about her shoulders, with such an expression of love and desire it was all he could do not to run to the bed and take her in his arms. He thought of Katie and suddenly wished

he had not been so weak and selfish, wishing that they had never done anything past snogging...

"I know, Harry, I know. But — but after you told me about what happened — about changing time — I couldn't bear to lie to you any more. I want to think of every lie I ever told you and put it right." She swallowed and closed her eyes. "Let me think — well, there was when you found me trying to get to the Trophy Room because I found that note from Draco. I lied about thinking it was for me. You really must have thought I was quite the naive ninny! I found it in Mariah's Potions text, and I knew they were meeting. It wasn't that I was jealous, although I was a *little* peeved that he might be sneaking around behind my back. Point of pride, you know. I was really hoping to see whether they actually cared for each other; I hoped that if she could make him forget me, he'd break up with me and I'd be free. I never did get a chance to see them, though, thanks to Filch. And you."

He grimaced. "Sorry."

She shook her head and smiled at him. "I'm not. I could almost forget about everything else while you were holding me, and we were standing behind that statue, waiting for Filch to leave... I never wanted that moment to end..." But suddenly a yawn overcame her, and she stretched languorously; Harry practically choked, watching her thin nightdress move as she did this. "Oh my — we've been talking so long the sun is coming up. I'm going to look a fright, dark circles under my eyes..."

"Lie down", he said softly. "I'll sing you a lullaby. Something my mother used to sing to me."

She laughed. "You'll *what*?" He nodded and she snuggled down in the bed, her head on the pillow, gazing at him expectantly. He swallowed and watched as her eyes drifted closed; she looked so angelic and peaceful. Then, with her eyes closed, she whispered, "I do love you, Harry. Every time you told me that, I wanted to tell you the same thing, and now I have..." her voice trailed off sleepily.

The room was very still. Harry couldn't speak. But he could sing. He watched her face as she drifted into sleep, listening to his voice, to the Welsh words of a mother to her child:

*Huna blentyn yn fy mynwes
Clyd a chynnes ydyw hon
Breichiau mam sy'n dyn am danat,
Cariad mam sy dan fy mron
Ni cha dim amharu'th gyntun
Ni wna undyn â thi gam
Huna'n dawel, anwyl blentyn
Huna'n fwyn ar fron dy fam...*

He continued to watch her; her breaths were regular and deep, and he thought he could even see her eyes moving behind her eyelids. He rose and walked to the bed, not caring about Malfoy and his amulet. He saw that Ginny was clutching the basilisk as she slept, a small smile curling around the edge of her mouth. He leaned down and kissed her brow.

"I love you too, Ginny", he whispered to her. "Sleep well."

He crept into the corridor carefully, hoping no one would see him leaving her room, but everyone in the house still seemed to be asleep. He crawled back into the bed in "Jamie's room", falling asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. For once he felt utterly at peace.

* * *

"The wolf shall pounce."

"Huh?" Harry muttered to Sandy, eyes closed.

"The wolf shall pounce."

"That's nice..." he droned sleepily. A moment later, he was vaguely aware of the door to his room opening and heavy footsteps crossing to the bed. He jumped when a voice suddenly split the silence of the room, the sound ricocheting around his poor, empty-feeling cranium.

"C'mon!" Ron said, jogging in place at the foot of the bed, dressed for running. "I already rang a gong in Ginny's ear and got told off. She isn't running this morning; it's just you and me." Harry groaned, only able to open one eye so far, trying to sit up.

"Correction: it's just *you*. I'm having a lie-in." He squinted at his watch. It was seven o'clock.

"It's seven o'bleeding clock", Harry complained. "Are you out of your flipping mind? I was up until *five*." He closed his eyes and dropped back

onto the pillow, but a moment later he grunted with surprise and his eyes flew open again in shock.

Ron had grabbed one of his ankles and pulled him up in the air so that he was hanging upside down, staring at Ron's shins. Harry swore violently. "Oi, listen to the mouth on you! I want an explanation, and I want it *now*, Potter!"

"An explanation for *what*, you bloody sod?" Harry choked, trying to reach out for Ron's legs so he could do something to him. He didn't know what he wanted to do specifically, he just knew he wanted to hurt him a great deal. He didn't ever remember Ron physically attacking him before. Ron held him farther away from his body when Harry's arms started flailing at him; Harry couldn't reach him. Ron was showing no signs of stress or strain, holding his best friend upside-down in the air wearing nothing but his boxers (something which was making Harry feel *very* vulnerable). Harry might have been a feather to him. *Damn werewolf strength*, Harry thought grumpily.

In the doorway of his room, Harry now saw upside-down versions of Fred and George; they were in dressing gowns, covered in more freckles than ever, and sporting large, amused grins.

"Yes, Ron", one of them said. "An explanation for what?" Harry couldn't tell whether it was Fred or George, especially as he was upside-down, but they were both looking highly amused.

"Harry here said that he didn't want to go running this morning because he was up until *five in the morning*."

The twin who hadn't yet spoken shrugged and said, "So what? I don't even feel like running when I've had eight hours — not that Angelina ever lets me —" That was George then, Harry thought. Fred gave him a backhanded swat on the arm, but both of them were still grinning.

"Yeah, well, Ginny's not coming either, and *she* said it was because she'd been up until *five in the morning*!" he exploded now, directing this at Harry's head as much as this was possible. Harry could think of only two words:

Bloody hell.

Suddenly, Ginny's upside-down image appeared next to her brothers' in the doorway; she had pulled on a garish plaid dressing gown over her nightdress. "*Ron!*" she cried. "Whatever are you *doing*? Put Harry down *now!*" Harry felt Ron's grip on his ankle loosening, and Ginny must have

had the same thought; she cried, "No!" before Ron could open his hand and let Harry fall on his head. "On the bed!" she admonished him.

Harry had a hard time seeing Ron's face from his current position, but he could tell that Ron wasn't happy. Neither were the twins. As he fell back onto the bed, he saw that the identical freckled faces were frowning deeply at him — and the twins were almost *never* not smiling or laughing. *That* did not bode well.

Ginny put her hands on her hips and glared up at Ron. "Remus told you that you are *not* to use your strength that way. Remember Roger Davies in the infirmary? I thought you were doing so much better now..."

Ron shook his finger in her face. "Oh, no you don't! You're not going to turn this around and make it all about *me*. I want to know what the pair of you were up to until five in the morning!"

"Oh, no you *don't* want to know", Ginny shot back; Harry looked back and forth between them. He was unlikely to get a word in edgewise and decided he wouldn't even *try*. "You don't want to know because the truth is boring and mundane and wouldn't give you an excuse for throwing a *fit*. The *truth* is we were just talking. That's all! *Talking!*" Harry watched Ron's face; he was strongly reminded of Ron's reaction to finding out he and Ginny had spent the night in the Quidditch changing rooms, and he wondered how soon *Did you shag my sister?* would come out of his mouth.

Harry smiled feebly at the twins, who stood to his left with identically-crossed arms and identical scowls directed unnervingly at him. George — at least, he thought it was George — raised one eyebrow at him. Harry wasn't sure what *that* was supposed to mean.

"Talking?" Ron said incredulously. "Talking all night until five in the morning?"

"No, not talking all night. Somewhere around three o'clock Harry went to the loo, and he — he opened the wrong door on the way back." He glanced at her warily; she begged him with her eyes not to contradict this little lie.

"Er, yeah", he said. "And then I saw the window seat and sat down, looking down the High Street, and Ginny surprised me by asking me what the hell I was doing in her room. I didn't even see her until she spoke", he added truthfully. "We ended up talking until five."

"*Talking?* For two hours?" Ron said, still unwilling to believe.

"Yes", Ginny said firmly. "Talking. But by five we were both knackered. Harry came back to his room and we both went back to sleep. End of story."

"Well —" Ron blustered, Ginny having knocked the wind out of his sails; "well —" he tried again, "why are you just standing there while Harry here is in his underwear, eh?"

She threw up her hands. "Because I'm not a child, *that's* why. *And* I have six brothers. *And* we've both been down in the pool at Ascog at the same time —"

"It's not the same! Don't come parading in here in your underwear and tell me it's the same thing as a bikini!"

She looked at him blankly. "Ron, I do believe you've become *completely* unhinged. It's a pity wizards aren't in the habit of consulting mental health professionals unless they've suffered brain damage. I'd say you need *years* of therapy."

"You've trying to make this about me again!"

She stood toe to toe with him. "It *is* about you. It's about how *you* were accusing me yesterday of shagging my boyfriend — which I *would* be perfectly within my rights to do, if I wanted — and now you're accusing me of shagging Harry, who is your *best friend*. We were *talking*, Ron. We're friends too, Harry and I. And anyway, I thought you didn't like Draco. If you thought I was with someone else — especially Harry — I thought you'd be the first one to throw a parade. Not that we *were* doing anything... I'm just saying..."

Ron backed down a bit, grimacing. "It's not that — that —" He couldn't finish. "Oh, *bollocks*," he said lamely, sitting at the foot of the bed. Ginny smirked at him, triumphant. Harry glanced at the twins, who seemed to have come over to Ginny's side. George (he thought) winked at him.

"You know we'd rather you were with Ginny than Malfoy being with her, right Harry?" George said to him.

"I think it's just that — well, the idea of *anybody* shagging our sister —" Fred said, bobbing his head in Ginny's direction.

Ginny whirled on them. "So, are you going to do the same thing to Maggie? Are you going to walk up to Professor Snape and challenge him to a wizard's duel for shagging your sister?"

All four boys gaped at her and said in unison, "*Snape?*"

Ginny crossed her arms and looked at them all very smugly. "Turns out they met and had a brief, steamy affair six years ago", she said, clearly taking great pleasure in telling them this. "She told me all about it when she came to stay at the Burrow. We sat up late. *Talking*", she said pointed to Ron in particular. "Well — not really everything. I'm assuming the 'steamy' part from one or two hints she dropped. She had just finished school and was going to begin university, to read Classics. As a treat, her parents bought her sailing lessons — she'd always wanted to learn — but she was a bit of a disaster. Almost immediately, the boom knocked her overboard. Well, this other yacht happened to be passing by —"

"— the *Patricia*", Harry said softly, remembering sailing on the Firth of Clyde in his other life. Ginny raised one eyebrow and went on; Harry hoped the boys hadn't noticed.

"— and they fished her out of the water. Snape and his uncle taught her to sail instead, and, well —" Ginny blushed prettily. "Let's just say that wasn't *all* he taught her —"

Ron and the twins had dropped their jaws in disbelief.

"But — but — but —" Fred sputtered. "It was *Snape!*"

Harry bristled. "He was good enough for my mum. You should be *happy* for your sister if there's some chance they might get back together!"

Now it was Ron's turn to say, "But — but — it was *Snape!*"

"I *know*! And yes, he's been rough on all of us in school, but it's for a reason. None of us wanted to be on his bad side, did we? He made us work damn hard, and I, for one, am glad he did." He turned to Fred. "Are you telling me you've *never* used anything you learned from him when you're creating your stuff? What about Canary Creams, or Ton-Tongue Toffee?"

Fred looked sheepish now. "He actually gave me two O.W.L.s, for beginning and intermediate Potions. Flitwick and McGonagall were the only other professors who did that. In fact, they were the only three who gave me *any* O.W.L.s." Well, Harry thought, that made sense; Potions, Charms and Transfiguration would be the areas of magic involved in making a sweet that temporarily transfigured you into a canary, or that put an engorgement charm on your tongue.

"She said he was quite romantic with her", Ginny said, harking back to Maggie's and Snape's relationship. "He told her he was a teacher at a boarding school up north, and that he would leave his post if he could, but

that his headmaster was counting on him to come back, especially as a new student was coming who was something of a celebrity —"

Harry sat up straighter. "Wait — how long ago did you say this was?"

"Six years."

Harry swallowed. "That was me. I was the reason he had to leave her — because Dumbledore wanted him to look after me."

"Look after you!" George howled, almost doubled up with laughter. "Snape?"

Ron was sober. "Don't laugh. He saved Harry's life during our first year. Remember Harry's first Quidditch match, when his broom was trying to throw him? That was because Quirrell was jinxing him. Snape was countering the jinx — only we didn't know that —"

Harry nodded. "Right. Hermione and Ron thought he was the one jinxing me because they could see him staring at me and moving his lips, doing the counter-jinx. So Hermione — er —"

"What?" Fred wanted to know.

"She set fire to his robes", Ron said placidly. Fred and George tried to suppress it for only a moment before they burst out into peals of laughter. Harry, Ron and Ginny were having a difficult time containing their laughter now too; it was too infectious.

While the others continued laughing, Harry sobered, thinking *That's why he looked like he hated me from the first day I was a Hogwarts. It had nothing to do with my mother or father. I had taken him away from Maggie.*

He felt ill and put his arms across his stomach. In the midst of Ron and Fred and George chatting noisily about Snape and how Harry, Ron and Hermione thought he was after the Stone, Ginny sat on the bed and looked at him.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

He smiled at her, remembering her telling him that she loved him. *At last...* But they couldn't be together. Not yet. Not for a long time, perhaps. Plus, there was the small matter of Katie still. He sighed.

"I know what would make me feel better. I think I want to go for a run after all."

She nodded. "I think I will, too. I'll go get ready."

Harry watched Ron and the twins while he searched in his bag for some running clothes. He smiled and shook his head over some of the things they were saying as he donned some shorts and tied his running

shoes. When he was pulling on a green former T-shirt (the sleeves had been cut off), he heard Fred say, "Oh, *no*. What if — what if he becomes our *brother-in-law*?"

"Eeeew", was Ron's immediate reaction. Harry laughed.

"They're just now getting reacquainted after six years! And anyway, you never know — he might decide he wants to leave Hogwarts to be with her..."

Ron brightened now. "Good point! Maybe we can convince them to marry sometime in the next month. Before our seventh year starts, preferably —"

George cried, "Hell, no! We're out of school. We don't care if he's still teaching there. But *relatives* — argh! You have to see them at every *birthday*, every *holiday* —"

Ron and his twin both wrestled him onto the bed. "Oh, it's such a *burden* seeing your relatives, is it?" Ron asked him, but now he was laughing, and Fred and George joined him. Harry grinned at the tangled mass of Weasleys on the bed. For a minute, it reminded him of the good-natured wrestling with his own brothers...

Brothers. Severus Snape's sons. He remembered vividly now how happy his stepfather had been at Simon and Stuart's first birthday party. Harry was five and Jamie was three, and his dad had been constantly ordering everyone to smile, snapping their pictures with his camera, until his mother, laughing and beautiful, had finally grabbed the camera from him and took his picture with the twins, one little boy on each hip, and his stepfather smiling broadly, his eyes crinkled up merrily as he held his boys, deep smile-lines etched in his cheeks... And then he insisted that Harry was his boy too, and pulled the bashful Harry into the picture...

Harry laughed at the Weasley boys. "You might find that you actually *prefer* a *happy* Snape over an angry-with-the-world Snape. I know I prefer being around him when he's happy."

Ron and his brothers looked at each other, perplexed. "*When* have you ever seen Snape *happy*?" one of the twins demanded. Suddenly, Harry looked up and saw Ginny standing in the doorway in her running clothes. She had a very distressed look on her face. *She knew*...

Harry slapped Ron on the back. "Ready to go running?" He hoped no one would notice he hadn't answered the question.

Ron looked up at him, frowning. "When did you get dressed? And I thought —" He saw Ginny standing in the doorway, also dressed for running. He shrugged and stood. "Well, I guess we're going running."

He seemed calm once more, following Harry and Ginny down the stairs and outdoors. Rather than shocking the residents of Hogsmeade, they ran to the castle and back twice. After taking turns in the shower, they sat down with the other residents of Hog's End to eat breakfast in the kitchen. Percy and Lee weren't coming to the Quidditch match; they had pressing business to take care of, a new client in Belgium who would be carrying the full Weasley Wizard Wheezes product line in all of their shops. There was evidently some question of whether they would accept payment in Belgian francs, as everyone's Gringott's assets were still frozen and inaccessible. But when Percy met Harry's eye, he turned bright red and looked away. He did the same thing with Lee, with whom he was going to be working instead of going to the match. Harry thought this very odd.

Harry watched Ginny while he ate; it was such a lovely feeling, being in this familiar place, where she'd never been in his other life, and just being able to watch her eat, and talk to her brothers, and know that she loved him. We have years, he thought. We have years ahead of us. If it's all a matter of waiting, I can wait. I can be patient. For her, the wait will be worth it.

* * *

As they approached the familiar Hogwarts Quidditch pitch, they encountered a roped-off area before they reached the stands, and saw that a number of authoritative-looking people Harry immediately pegged as Aurors were scrutinizing everyone entering. There was a bit of a queue to approach. Ron frowned.

"Security", he explained to Harry, not looking particularly happy about this.

Harry leaned out of the queue to see what the Aurors were doing. Most people received a nod and were passed through; occasionally a witch or wizard was asked for his or her wand, and the wand was tested to find out the most recent spell it had cast. Harry straightened up again, telling Ron, the twins, Angelina and Ginny, "This could take a while."

Sandy hissed to Harry, "*You shall be wanted.*"

"Wanted?" he hissed back at her. "Wanted by whom?"

She didn't answer.

After a while Harry kicked a piece of turf, muttering, "Why are they even bothering to hold Quidditch matches if they're so worried about security?"

"Blimey, Harry", Ron said. "Do you know how people would panic if the League Cup was canceled? I mean, the attack on Diagon Alley was bad, but they never even canceled the League Cup during You-Know-Who's first reign of terror. Everyone would think it was the end of the world if they did *that*."

"*You* mean they wouldn't have a good way to pacify everyone", Ginny countered. "This way, they can simultaneously occupy people with mindless sport —"

"*Bread and circuses*," muttered Harry.

"— and make it look like the Ministry's really *doing* something, just because they're checking over everyone who's entering the stadium. I'm sure they're really going to get to the bottom of the Diagon Alley attack by doing *that*."

"Ginny!" Ron said urgently, watching an Auror who was looking at Ginny very intently. "Don't say things like that here, all right?" he said out of the corner of his mouth.

Harry didn't like the look of the Auror either. "I agree with Ron, Ginny. You can't be too careful what you say in public. Rant back at Hog's End, all right?" His eyes pleaded with her, and she backed down from her brother, her eyes locked with Harry's. He looked away from her reluctantly.

They finally reached the front of the queue, and after a moment's visual examination, everyone in their party was passed through but Harry. He stood waiting, while the Auror — a middle-aged man of either Indian or Pakistani descent — looked at him suspiciously, even going so far as to touch Harry's scar with a frown. Harry flinched and backed up when he did this, wondering what was going on.

"What is it, Aziz?" the other Auror asked him. She was about thirty, very large and Nordic-looking, like a Valkyrie.

"Come with me", Aziz said to Harry, his hand clamped on his arm, dragging him toward a tent that had been erected near the Quidditch changing rooms. Harry looked back and forth between the Aurors when the large woman clamped her hand on his other arm.

"What? What did I do? What's going on?"

"Did you think you'd get away with it, Death Eater?" Aziz asked him, his face very close to Harry's. Harry panicked for a moment, thinking that they somehow had detected that he'd been initiated in his other life.

"G-get away with what?" he sputtered. He saw that the others were shocked to see the Aurors dragging him away; Ron and Ginny started to move toward him, but some other Aurors stopped them.

"Harry!" he heard them yelling at him.

"Get away with what? You're not very clever, are you? Did you think you could walk in here, masquerading as Harry Potter, of all people, and no one would *notice*? Not a very inconspicuous disguise, after all." The hands on his arms tightened.

"But I *am* Harry Potter, you idiots!" Harry suddenly pulled his arms free. "*That's* why you're detaining me? You don't believe I'm *me*?"

"What's going on here, what's going on?" a familiar voice said, pushing through the crowd. Harry looked up and saw Ludo Bagman, head of Magical Games and Sports for the Ministry. "Ah, Harry! Good to see you!"

The Aurors looked at him uncertainly. "Hello, Mr. Bagman. You know Harry Potter personally?"

"Of course I do, of course I do! I know everyone worth knowing, right Harry?" he said with a jovial wink. Harry never thought it would be possible to be glad to see Ludo Bagman, but he was.

"Well", the Valkyrie said, "can you help us positively identify him?"

Harry had a sudden thought. He motioned for Bagman to come closer and whispered to him what he knew about his past goblin troubles and how he was trying to help Harry during the tournament. Bagman straightened up, reddening.

"That's Harry Potter, all right", he told the Aurors, who backed away now, as though they had never been dragging Harry over the grass to the tent.

"How do you know?" Aziz said, still looking suspicious.

"Let's just say he told me something which I daresay only Harry knows — and something which *only* Harry will continue to know, eh?" he said with a raised eyebrow.

Harry raised his eyebrow back; he hadn't been trying to blackmail Bagman, not really; but he needed to make sure he chose a piece of information that was not common knowledge.

The Aurors finally let him pass, and Bagman, waved him off, saying, "I'll come talk to you before the match! Must fly now, very busy..." And he was lost in the crowd once more.

Harry was relieved to join his friends again; Ron and Ginny both looked at him with concern as they climbed up to their seats. Harry somehow felt a pall had been cast on the day. After they bought some bottles of butterbeer from a vendor, he pulled out his Omnioculars to scan the stadium, both making an effort to forget about his humiliation at the hands of the Aurors and trying to see who had come that he might know. (He hoped no one he knew had noticed him being detained.) He frowned as he looked through the lenses; regularly spaced throughout the spectator seating were witches and wizards standing with crossed arms, their wands at the ready. They appeared to be very alert, scanning the crowd with their eyes, occasionally nodding at each other, and generally looking ready to act at a moment's notice.

Aurors.

There were Aurors all over the place. Harry swallowed, remembering being a fugitive. Somehow, the Aurors didn't have the effect of calming him and making him feel everything was under control. He remembered his momentary panic when the Aurors had been dragging him toward the tent, and trying to get Ginny to stop talking about Diagon Alley when that Auror was looking at her. What was the wizarding world coming to that they had to have so many Aurors at a Quidditch match? he thought. He tried to ignore them, but it was difficult. Every time he spotted another, his pulse quickened. Unfortunately, Aurors were never again likely to give him a feeling of safety and reassurance.

There were still about twenty minutes to go before the match was supposed to start. They had good seats, right in the middle on the Chudley Cannons side, although a part of Harry looked longingly toward the Holyhead Harpies side. He'd already surprised Ron once by calling the Harpies his favorite team (which it was, in his other life); he wasn't going to make that mistake again.

"So the Cannons had a good year?" he asked Ron, not having been following the League very closely. He tried to ignore an Auror standing about twenty feet away.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Do you even know how the League works after all this time, Harry? All you care about is the Inter-House Quidditch Cup

at school. The League — now that's *real* Quidditch."

Harry bristled; he knew very well how the Quidditch League worked, but that was from his other life, and he was very, very tired of saying, "I can't tell you", when people asked him how he knew something he wasn't supposed to know that he'd learned in that other world. *Fine*, he thought. *From now on I'll just play dumb.*

"All right then", he said in a challenging voice. "Explain it to me."

"You're sure you want to know? All right. Each season, the thirteen teams in the league play four matches each for a total of twenty-six matches. The rankings from the previous season — before the quarter-finals, that is — determine the pairings. There are three divisions, but the top-ranked team isn't put into any of them. Division A always has the teams that were ranked second, fifth, eighth and eleventh. Division B gets third, sixth, ninth and twelfth. The rest are Division C. With me so far?"

Harry nodded, itching to pick up his omnioculars again; Ron could be almost as pedantic as Hermione at times, especially on the subject of Quidditch. Plus, he already *knew* all this.

"Each team", Ron went on, "plays the other three teams in the same division, for a total of six matches within each division. The top-ranked team — the one that doesn't have a division — plays the other top teams from the previous season, down to number five. That's how the top five teams get their fourth match. The bottom eight teams then pair off for one more match each. After that the new rankings are done."

Harry glanced around the stadium, barely listening to Ron now. "Right, right, each team plays four matches and then they redo the rankings according to how many wins each team has..."

"Right! You've got it." *Well, I'm not a complete idiot*, Harry thought. "For instance", Ron went on, "this year, the two teams that were both undefeated — the Harpies and Puddlemere United — were ranked third and seventh last year. Puddlemere had a very bad year; they're doing a lot better now. So, since the Harpies had a higher rank than Puddlemere last year, this year they're ranked first and Puddlemere second, even though they both have four wins. Are you lost yet?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Do you want me to be?"

"Nah", Ron said, not noticing Harry's impatience. "So; the teams with three wins each were ranked the same way, according to where they fell on last year's rankings. Same for the teams with two wins, and one. You get

the idea. So, with the new ranks done, from one to thirteen, they take the top eight teams and pair them off for four League quarter-final matches. The Cannons actually came in *fifth* in the new rankings, and *then* they actually won their quarter-final match against the Appleby Arrows. I couldn't *believe* it."

"But the Holyhead Harpies are undefeated", Harry said, suppressing a smile, feeling mischievous. Ron looked a bit grumpy.

"Yeah, yeah, they're undefeated."

Harry relented, feeling a bit bad for Ron. He was wearing the bright orange *Cannons* hat Harry had given him, disappearing against his bright hair. He'd been waiting for *years* for the Cannons to do this well. It wasn't that they didn't have an illustrious history; they'd been League champions twenty-one times. Unfortunately, the last time was in 1892.

"Well, if the Cannons have come this far, they must be playing really well. They can't have had many losses."

"Just the one", Ron said reluctantly.

"Oh; which team?"

Ron hesitated before answering. "The Harpies." He sighed. "They were both in Division B. The Harpies are the division champions; they *trowned* all of the other teams in Division B. And then they *slaughtered* the Wigtown Wanderers in the quarter-finals, and that was even with Wilmer Parkin in the pink of health. He just joined the team this year. I think he'd rather play for someone else, but it's a family tradition for players in his family to be on the Wanderers. He's their only decent player right now, a Chaser, and he was out for the first two matches of the season, two separate injuries. Trouble is, he also plays for England, and he was hurt in European Cup games against Transylvania and Luxembourg right before each of those division matches. Hard luck. He was finally available for their game against the Tutshill Tornadoes, but by then, Puddlemere was undefeated so they won Division C.

"The Wanderers wouldn't have squeaked into the quarter-finals at number eight if they hadn't beaten the Falmouth Falcons in their fourth match. The Falcons haven't won a match all season; completely *pathetic*. I mean, the Wanderers were ranked thirteenth last year — before Parkin joined — and the Falcons were twelfth, and the Falcons *still* lost." Ron sighed again and picked up his program, flipping the pages idly, as though trying to forget how good the Harpies were. Then he saw something in the

program which made him brighten considerably. He held the page up for Harry to see.

"Speaking of the European Cup, there's still that to follow, even after the League Cup is over! Last one was during the Christmas holidays when we were in fourth year. I didn't really follow it, since we were so caught up in you being a Tournament Champion and the Yule Ball and everything. Plus, I think a lot of people were still reeling from the World Cup. Since Krum couldn't play for Bulgaria, as he was doing the Tournament, Bulgaria didn't qualify, and there were so many starting players for Ireland who were injured during the celebration of their World Cup win, they had to play a lot of reserves for their qualifying match, which came right after, and — well, they didn't qualify. With Ireland and Bulgaria out of it, I think a lot of people lost interest that year."

"Who finally won?" Harry asked, genuinely interested now.

Ron looked thoughtful. "Italy beat Norway, I think. They played in Greece. It didn't attract that many people, not after the World Cup. This year, Wales, Ireland and England are all still in it. Scotland didn't make it. But wait until you hear this: the final will be in *Wales*, between Christmas and New Year! We won't be in school! Maybe we can get tickets."

Harry's eyes grew large at the thought. "*That* would be *brilliant*! Where in Wales is it?"

"Some old castle. There's actually enough space within the outer walls for the pitch, and the seats are up on the parapets. I don't care if I don't get *anything* for Christmas if I get to see the European Cup final."

Fred clapped Ron on the shoulder. "Well, you know *we're* going to be there, little brother. We've just signed a concession contract to have Weasley's Wizard Wheezes sold at the quarter-finals, semi-finals and final. Lee did it. He's amazing, Ron. He could sell *anything*. Just has the gift of gab, you know?"

Then Fred caught Harry's eye and looked a bit awkward. "Er, sorry Harry."

Harry frowned. "Sorry about what?"

"Well, you know. Mentioning Lee."

Harry was still baffled. "Why can't you talk about Lee?"

George gave him that look again, that made Harry think he knew more than he was saying. "Because of Katie, Harry", he said calmly. Harry looked him in the eye, afraid to blink.

"Oh, right. No. I mean, I'm fine about Lee. And he seems to be fine about me. No problem. Did either of us give you the impression otherwise back at the house? I'm just sorry he couldn't be here today. I know how he likes a good Quidditch match, even if he isn't doing the commentary."

Fred and Ron looked at each other as though they didn't believe this for a minute. Harry really didn't want to have a conversation about this, and was relieved to hear a voice saying, "Oi! Harry!"

It was Bagman again, making his way through the seats. "Harry! There you are!" Harry saw the twins immediately adopt hostile glares, even though he'd gotten Harry out of his spot of trouble earlier. He never *had* paid them back their money from the World Cup.

"Hello, Mr. Bagman", Harry said evenly.

"God, Harry! Call me Ludo!" He slapped Harry on the back, ignoring the twins (or so Harry thought). But suddenly, he was addressing them quite amiably, as though there was no bad blood between them at all and they had just been having a few pints down at the pub.

"I understand we're to have some of your creations sold at the European Cup matches." He smirked, leaning over conspiratorially, putting his finger to the side of his nose. "You may thank me", he said to the twins, *sotto voce*; Fred and George looked at each other, alarmed. "Least I could do", Bagman said, standing up straight again and clearing his throat. It seemed to be the closest the twins would get to an admission of guilt or an apology. Harry wondered how Bagman had ever managed to get the goblins to leave him alone (if they indeed had).

Bagman turned back to Harry. "Listen, I wanted to talk to you. Don't run off after the match. Friend of mine wants to talk to you. Captain of the Welsh team."

Harry had tipped up his bottle of butterbeer to drink, and now risked spitting it all over Bagman. He only just managed to swallow instead of choking on it.

"Er, why?"

Ludo looked very sober now. "You haven't heard? One of the casualties in the Diagon Alley attack was Audra Griffiths. She was the starting Seeker for Wales, and also for the Harpies. Their former reserve Seeker has moved up; she's playing today, and has also taken Griffiths' spot on the Welsh team. The Harpies hired a new reserve Seeker, but she doesn't

qualify for the Welsh team, as she wasn't born there and doesn't live there. I understand *you* were born in Wales. Is that true?"

Harry swallowed, trying to think whether he'd ever seen his birth certificate. "I — I don't know. I think so. I can check."

"Check quickly. Tryouts for the reserve spot on the Welsh team are the first Saturday in September. You should do it, Harry. You could even get the starting spot, you never know. The Cup games start the week after that. Eight Saturdays of matches between the sixteen qualifying European teams. The quarter-finals are for four weeks after that, then the semi-finals. The final is the twenty-eighth of December, in Wales. Of course, if you were playing for Wales, and they lost their match in early October, that wouldn't much matter, would it?"

Harry couldn't tell whether he was trying to guilt him into trying for the team. *Playing in the European Cup!* And if he managed to get the Welsh team to the final — to be played *in* Wales...! It would be even better than the World Cup. Then he reminded himself it would only be a reserve slot. Still...

"Oh, wait", Bagman said suddenly; "you would have to be of age to even try out. Are you seventeen yet?"

"You bet!" Ron said excitedly; Harry just noticed that he'd been barely containing his excitement the entire time Bagman had been speaking. "He just had his birthday!"

Bagman nodded and clapped his hands together with satisfaction. "Excellent! Stick around after the match, Harry; I'll bring Owen over to mean you. Owen Aberystwyth."

Harry nodded at him, unable to find words, as Bagman moved off and the spectators began to anticipate the start of the match. Harry wasn't sure he would really see the match, after looking forward to it for so long; all he could see was himself, wearing the colors of Wales, flying over the pitch as a magically amplified voice cried to the crowd, "*I give you Potter!*"

He couldn't believe it; he might be able to play Quidditch for Wales while he was still in school. It was beyond his wildest dreams. He forgot about Voldemort, about Diagon Alley, about being Head Boy...

He had somehow forgotten that the opening was for a reserve player as he lifted his Omnioculars to his eyes again, scanning the crowd, imagining

all of these people coming to see *him* play Seeker in the European Cup final... The Aurors didn't have the power to bother him any more.

"Ron!" he said suddenly, putting his elbow in Ron's ribs.

"Ow, Harry! What, are you trying to get back at me for this morning?"

"No, no; did you bring your Omnis?" Ron nodded, taking them out.

"Right. Look see who's over *there*, right behind the Holyhead team physician."

Ron put his Omnioculars to his eyes and tried to look where Harry was pointing. Harry picked his up and looked again; then he swallowed, a cold feeling creeping over him.

She seemed to be looking right back at him through the lenses...

Ron and Harry turned to look at each other. "What's *she* doing here?" Harry demanded. "Since when is *she* into Quidditch?"

Ron shrugged. "She was at the World Cup. And since she lost her home, her husband and then disowned her son, she has to have been doing *something* to earn a living and stay busy."

"But what?" Harry demanded, thinking out loud. "And I doubt she's hurting much for money. She has enough extra for a Quidditch ticket."

Harry looked again at Narcissa Malfoy. She'd cut her hair so it was short and boyish, but he easily recognized those features, especially as they were contorted into that unpleasant expression he had first seen at the Quidditch World Cup. She turned to speak to the woman who was the Harpies team physician — in fact, most of the people on the Harpies' side were women, as it was by tradition an all-witch team. He frowned now as he continued to watch Draco Malfoy's mother talking to the other blonde woman. There was something about the other woman, something familiar...

"Who's that Malfoy's mum is talking to?" Ron asked, looking with his Omnioculars again.

Harry frowned while he continued to look. "I think she's a doctor at St. Mungo's. There's something about her —"

"The game's about to begin!" Fred said excitedly. Harry looked up; Fred was next to Ginny, who was sitting the farthest from Harry. Ron, George and Angelina were in between. He and Ginny couldn't get too close, but he *wished*...

Ludo Bagman was the commentator. "Ladies and gentlemen", his magically amplified voice intoned. "Please stand for a moment of silence

in honor of Audra Griffiths, of the Holyhead Harpies, and Wilmer Parkin, of the Wigtown Wanderers, both tragically lost in the recent attack on Diagon Alley. Let us all remember these two talented players, a true loss to the British and Irish Quidditch League..."

Harry noticed a thunderstruck look on Ron's face as they stood. All witches and wizards who were wearing hats removed them, and all present bowed their heads in respectful silence. When Bagman said, "Thank you. You may be seated", the rustling of the crowd almost kept Harry from hearing Ron.

"I don't believe it."

Where they were sitting again, Ron said, "Parkin. I can't believe he's *dead*. It's the end of an era."

Harry wanted to ask why, but Bagman had started announcing the two teams. The players flew out toward the middle of the field while the crowd cheered them on. While the spectators on the opposite side were cheering on the Harpies, Ron said to Harry, "He was the last Parkin. He was young; about twenty-five. No kids."

Harry shrugged. "So? I mean, it's bad that he was killed in the attack, and it's too bad he never had kids, but I don't understand why it's the 'end of an era'."

"Well, not in general. For the Wigtown Wanderers it is, though. The club was started almost six-hundred years ago by a family of four brothers and three sisters. Their dad was a wizarding butcher. That's why they still have a silver meat-cleaver on their robes, and that's why Parkin was playing for them when any team in the League would have loved to have him. For almost six-hundred years there's almost always been at least one Parkin on the team, or there's been one getting ready to be old enough. This one, though; he was the last one. And since he hadn't had kids yet — no more Parkins on the Wigtown Wanderers."

"And the Harpies score!" Bagman cried, making Ron turn around and grab his Omnioculars.

"Aw, the luck! Don't distract me any more, Harry!"

Harry sighed and settled back to watch the game through his own Omnioculars, so that it would be recorded and he could play it back later, as slow or as fast as he liked.

The game was very exciting, but Ron became grumpier and grumpier as it went on. Harry was starting to worry about his werewolf temper and

strength again. Finally, the Harpies' Seeker made a spectacular dive which Harry followed with his Omnioculars, making sure he caught it all to watch again and again later. His heart was in his throat until the moment when she had the Snitch in her hand, and the crowd was on its feet, all of the Harpies' fans screaming hoarsely, and Harry longed to join them; in his other life he had never seen his favorite club do so well.

After the game, Ludo Bagman came to Harry again and brought two other wizards with him. "Harry!" he said jovially. "Harry, this is Owen Aberystwyth. Owen, it is my pleasure to introduce to you Harry Potter."

Harry stood and shook hands with Aberystwyth, a medium-height man who had black hair and bright blue eyes, and who looked like he hadn't shaved for several days. Everything passed in a blur. Aberystwyth asked about which Quidditch players he liked in the League. Ron supplied him with the names, saying things like, "Oh, Harry was just going on about Rudy Finster, on Puddlemere. Brilliant at dodging Bludgers, Harry said." Ron was putting quite a lot of words in his mouth; he dreaded having to remember any of it in future conversations with the Welsh captain.

Finally, Owen Aberystwyth was able to talk to Harry very seriously about the concerns he had for the team. Ron finally started paying attention to the other man whom Ludo Bagman had brought with him, but Harry didn't hear their conversation. He was too dazed at the thought of playing in the European Cup. When they began their walk back to Hogsmeade, Harry caught Ginny's eye. She grinned at him behind Fred as they walked.

"Isn't that amazing?" she asked him. "You might be playing for Wales and Ron might be playing for England!"

His jaw dropped. "What?"

Fred laughed at his expression. "Harry, weren't you paying any attention? The other bloke was Monty Mathers, captain of the English team. They've got to replace Parkin. They have reserves, of course, but when they move up, there'll be reserve openings. He actually wanted to talk to Angelina about trying, but she said she wasn't interested. Ron was, though, so he said all right, come and try, what's it going to hurt?"

Harry frowned. "Why should Angelina turn that down? What's she thinking? She was a brilliant Chaser."

Fred frowned at the three in front of him, Ron, Angelina and George, all chatting noisily about Ron trying for the open reserve position. "Dunno.

Seems queer to me, that's for sure..."

Harry was even more excited now; if he was playing for Wales (even if he was a reserve and never had the chance to actually play) and if Ron was a reserve for England, if either of those teams went to the final, they'd probably be able to get fantastic tickets for their friends, even without the twins' pull. (And now it seemed they might owe their good fortune to Bagman putting in a good word for them, not Lee's salesmanship.)

However, he never could get Sandy to tell him whether *You shall be wanted* referred to the Aurors who didn't believe he was Harry Potter; the captain of the Welsh team, or —

Ginny Weasley.

* * *

When they'd returned to Hogs End, Percy and Lee still weren't back from Belgium, so they had lunch without them. Harry hung about the rest of the afternoon, lounging on the terrace with Ron and the twins and Ginny and Angelina, stealing looks at Ginny every so often, just reveling in being able to see her, even from a short distance. When he finally had to return to Ascog, it was a wrench, and when she stepped forward to give him a firm hug, he didn't want to let go of her for a second. She stepped back finally, standing next to Ron, smiling at him lovingly. Harry tried to keep Ron focused on him, so he wouldn't notice the look on Ginny's face.

"And next week we go shopping in Diagon Alley."

"I hope they've finished sorting things out by then", Ron said with a sigh. Harry agreed.

"Right. I've got all of this money from working for Aberforth, but it's in pound notes. I was going to change it to Galleons, but that's been impossible so far."

"The way things are going in Diagon Alley, from what I hear, you'd better hang on to your pound notes", Ginny said, a warning in her voice. "Many of the merchants aren't taking Galleons now. So many people can't get to their money or only had a small supply of gold on hand, so some of them have started taking Muggle money. After all, they have to be able to have some way to pay their employees, and to buy more wares to sell. And the inflation that's hit the shops! Zoey told me she bought the *Standard Book of Spells, Grade 6* for sixty pounds. Her parents have an emergency stash of Muggle money. But sixty pounds is about twelve Galleons, and I

know that inside Ron's old book, which I'll be using, it says it sold for four Galleons."

"Now, remember, Ginny, that one was also the twins', which they shared — after Fred dropped his into a Dissolution Potion, to test it for Snape during Potions class — and it was Percy's before that. *Percy* had to have a new copy, of course, since he said there had been new editions between him and Charlie being in school. So that makes it about five years old."

"And you're telling me the price *tripled* in five years? They're trying to make money any way they can, and soon everything's going to be priced out of anyone's reach! I hear some witches and wizards have gone back to the barter system."

Harry smirked; he had a feeling Ron wasn't going to win this fight. "I'd better be going, you two. Sirius was going to be doing some undercover work, and I want to find out how that went. If you need some Muggle money, I can lend you some until the Gringotts mess is cleared up, Ron. Don't worry about it."

For once Ron didn't object; he wasn't the only one in a fix over this. "Thanks, Harry. I'll pay you back as soon as they've got the damn goblins under control again. For all that Binns keeps teaching us about goblin rebellions, we wizards don't seem to be any better at controlling them than we ever were, eh?"

Harry agreed; then, before he lost his willpower and pulled Ginny into his arms, he threw the Floo powder into the fire, walked into the warm green flames and said, "Ascog Castle!" Ron and Ginny whirled out of sight.

* * *

Harry was surprised to see Severus Snape and his godfather chatting amiably on the couches in the sitting room when he returned to the castle. He stumbled into the room, shocked also to see that Snape was in his sailor garb. He had on a smart blue jacket, white trousers, a white shirt, and his hair was pulled back at the nape of his neck. Sirius looked as though he'd gotten some sun and was wearing simple jeans and a white T-shirt, looking more relaxed than Harry had ever seen him. *How odd*, Harry thought. He remembered that Sirius had looked very interested in Maggie when he'd first met her; evidently, he didn't bear Snape any ill will for Maggie preferring him.

"Harry! Welcome back. I heard the match on the wireless. So the Cannons are out of it. Hard luck, that." Harry shrugged.

"I reckon I can bear to cheer on the Harpies, if they take the League this year", he said, trying to avoid Snape's eye.

Sirius smiled. "Sit down, Harry, sit down. We have some news about Annie Weasley. Well, in a way..."

Harry sat, looking back and forth between them. "What do you mean?"

Sirius sighed. "When we went to inquire about her at the adoption agency, they sent us to the hospital where Maggie was seen by the Doughertys, before they adopted her. It's private, run by an order of nuns, and they also run an adjacent orphanage. They don't handle the legalities of adoptions themselves, however — they use the adoption agency for that. They didn't want to deal with having lawyers on staff and such. When we started digging, I had hoped we wouldn't need to use a lot of spells to get people to tell us what we needed to know, but we encountered a good bit of resistance at first. We thought they were just being close-mouthed in general, but then we found some people who opened up about Annie, and as we talked to person after person... well, to put it lightly, no one had anything nice to say about Anna Burroughs..."

"*Anna Burroughs?*"

"That's what the sisters named her. They all knew somehow that her name was Annie, and they heard her saying something in her sleep about a 'burrough'..."

Harry opened his eyes wide. "The Burrow! She was saying the name of her home!"

Sirius slapped his head. "Of course. I didn't think of that. Right. So maybe the memory charm didn't work as well on her as it did on Maggie. Little things got through, evidently. Still, as I was saying, Anna Burroughs was *not* the most popular child at the orphanage..."

"That doesn't matter. Why do we care that they didn't like her? The Dursleys didn't like me and that never put you off, Sirius."

"It's not that they didn't *like* her... Let me start over. Annie was eight going on nine when she was abducted. For all intents and purposes, let's call her nine. She was a smart, healthy nine-year-old girl, and when she woke up in hospital with no memory of her early life, she was rather skeptical about the stories she was being told about being the only

survivor of the house fire that killed her entire family. She didn't even have any burns, for one thing. Nor any lung-damage, from smoke."

"But — but — didn't they tell Maggie that she was the only survivor in her family too? How could they not notice? How could they not realize that the girls were sisters?"

Snape sighed. "Because the spells Pettigrew used on the sisters — by which I mean the nuns — confunded them to such a degree that they could not even recognize that they had two red-haired girls with remarkably similar features and very similar stories. Pettigrew had Maggie as the survivor of a car crash, not a fire. Now, you and I, if we saw the girls, neither of whom remembered anything at all, and heard those stories, we'd think there must be some connection. Any reasonable person would. Not so with the sisters who were working at the orphanage and hospital in 1979. Pettigrew saw to that."

"Right", Sirius added. "Plus, Maggie was adopted very quickly. She left from the hospital. She never actually lived at the orphanage."

"So how long did it take for Annie to be adopted?" Sirius and Snape looked at each other uncertainly. Harry saw. "What's wrong?"

"She *wasn't* ever adopted, Harry", Sirius told him.

"So — she lived there until — when? Did she leave at eighteen? Or sixteen? Did she take her GCSEs? Her A-Levels? She must have some kind of identification, she must have a government paper trail of some sort..."

Snape shook his head. "No, nothing. For a very simple reason: she ran away from the orphanage."

Harry's jaw dropped. "Ran away! When?"

Sirius sighed again. "When she was twelve. Actually, she didn't run away from the orphanage; she had been placed with a family interested in adopting her, and she ran away from their home. The police looked for her — not very hard, in my opinion, judging from the information on file with the police in Exeter. She was never found."

"She was only twelve! How can a twelve-year-old girl disappear without a trace?"

He looked back and forth between the two of them. Both men looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Miss Weasley — or Miss Burroughs, I should say, was a troublemaker of the highest order, according to the nuns at the orphanage", Snape said stiffly, as though discussing one of his own more

troublesome students. "Every time she was placed with a family interested in adopting her — and, mind you, she was placed with no fewer than seven families over a three-year period, which is a very high rate, considering her age at the time — she managed to stir up enough chaos and mayhem that she was promptly returned to the orphanage."

Sirius nodded. "The reverend mother's files were full of the things she'd done. Objects flying around the room. Televisions changing channels every second or faster, flipping through the entire spectrum; and they couldn't be turned off — even *unplugging* the blasted things didn't work. The same thing with various kitchen appliances; they would go mad and couldn't be stopped by cutting the power. Taps were mysteriously stuck in the on-position, flooding the house. One house was even made completely inaccessible because as soon as she was out of the car, vines began to grow all over it, sealing all of the windows and doors so no one could get in. As soon as they returned her to the orphanage, all of the vines disappeared."

Harry swallowed. "Sounds like she was doing some powerful accidental magic."

Snape shook his head. "I do not believe it *was* accidental. She was protesting. She did *not* want to live with any of those families. That was very clear. She made sure they, in turn, did not want her. The incidents became more pronounced as she became older. More — extreme."

Sirius smiled now. "The reverend mother said she didn't know whether to have the girl exorcised or taken before the Pope for a private audience."

Harry frowned. "Why?"

"Because she thought she was performing miracles. She called her a 'living saint'. She also said that many saints were not exactly known for being popular, so she didn't hold that against the girl. When a dog was hit by a car in front of the orphanage, Annie went running right out to it and healed its broken bones and stopped its internal hemorrhaging."

"She *healed* it?"

"Yes. Which is very advanced magic for adults, and usually requires a wand, some potions... But she did it as a *child*. She was twelve, and would have been in her second year at Hogwarts if she'd never been taken from Molly and Arthur. It was not long before she ran away. The owners of the dog came running right up and saw her do it, evidently. He'd been on a lead, but it was old and it snapped, and the loose dog went running in front of a car... Afterward, the owners of the dog spoke to the reverend mother

about Annie, saying they wanted to give her a home. She was packed off to visit them, to see how they all got on. The reverend mother said she had great hopes this time; Annie already seemed to get on so well with the couple, and she loved the dog and clearly would take good care of it. She still thought the girl was quite holy, performing miracles, not magic, and she wanted to her to be happy and have a home. The reverend mother thought Annie was destined for great things."

"And then she disappeared."

Sirius nodded again. "Right. When she left the orphanage with the family, that was the last any of the sisters saw of her."

Harry thought about this. "Did you get the name of that family? So you can talk to them?"

Snape stood. "Yes; in fact, I am going to see them tomorrow. Or at least, I am going to try to track them down. So far all we have is the address where they lived fifteen years ago. If that is not still their residence, some additional research will be necessary. But I fully expect we will be able to speak with them soon."

Harry shook his head. "I don't know whether we should tell the Weasleys about this yet. It doesn't sound very hopeful..."

Sirius heaved a sigh. "I agree. Although Severus", he nodded at him, "has already told Maggie. She won't tell Molly and Arthur and the others, I'm sure. It may not be as easy to find Annie as it was to find Maggie."

"Could I at least tell Ron and Ginny?" Harry asked. Sirius agreed to this. Then Harry saw that Snape was getting ready to leave; Harry looked nervously at his godfather. "Er, Sirius — there's something I'd like to talk to my — to Professor Snape about. Could you excuse us for a minute?"

Sirius looked like he was biting his tongue, refraining from asking, but he said, "Of course", and left the room, looking over his shoulder briefly. Snape looked at him expectantly. Harry weighed his words before beginning.

"Sir, I — I just found out about you and Maggie. I mean that you met six years ago. Just before I started school. And I wanted to say — I'm sorry you had to leave her. It's all my fault, and I don't blame you for hating me because of it —"

Snape's mouth was a very thin line. "Harry, I returned to the school for many reasons. You were one of them, yes. The Stone was another. And the loyalty I owe to the headmaster is yet another. Besides", he added, a slight

smirk at the edge of his mouth, "if I hadn't saved your skin in your first year, there might no longer *be* a Hogwarts. Who else, after all, would dare to go into the Chamber of Secrets and slay a basilisk at the age of twelve?" His eyes actually seemed to be glittering with amusement now.

"You know about that?" Harry's jaw dropped.

"You need to be mindful of who knows your secrets, and to whom they tell them. I am becoming reacquainted with Maggie Dougherty, and we talk a great deal; she, in turn, has been talking with her youngest sister and her sister has been telling her about the most interesting things that have happened to her... You can guess the rest."

Harry grinned. "Yeah, I can." He looked at Snape's clothes pointedly. "Where are you off to, then?"

"The Patricia is anchored up in the Bay. My uncle is on board, waiting for me to Apparate below decks, and then we are sailing back up to Dunoon. From there I will Apparate to Exeter tomorrow to meet your godfather and speak to the family who owned the dog healed by Annie Weasley — or Anna Burroughs."

Harry nodded. "Thanks for — for doing all this."

Severus Snape raised one eyebrow sharply. "You should have figured out by now, Potter, that I am not doing this for *you*. Tell your godfather not to be late tomorrow." And with that, he Disapparated with a *pop!* and Harry was alone.

* * *

The trip to Diagon Alley was not something Harry wanted to repeat soon. The only admission points were the fireplaces in the Leaky Cauldron, Madam Malkin's, and Flourish and Blotts. It was necessary to call the dining room at the pub to schedule an arrival (a clerk was taking calls there and scheduling people for the various fireplaces), and Aurors were waiting at each hearth to "greet" people as they arrived, ascertaining that they had legitimate business to attend to.

Harry wasn't questioned this time when he arrived in Madam Malkin's. The Aurors seemed to believe he was really Harry Potter. He was meeting Ron there, or so he thought; when he arrived, one of the Aurors who looked him over checked a parchment of scheduled arrivals and departures and found that Ron and Ginny had been slated to arrive in the Leaky Cauldron twenty minutes before he landed in the robe shop. He thanked

the Aurors, making certain to be just deferential enough but not licking their boots, and made his way through the Alley to the pub.

Diagon Alley was very nearly deserted. Very few people seemed to be venturing into it these days. It felt so odd not to be jostled by crowds of people as he walked by the shop windows. His footsteps echoed on the cobblestones, and he saw more than one previously-thriving shop cleaned out, with a "To let", sign in the window, and the name of the same agent, over and over, who evidently managed most of the Diagon Alley properties. No more than three people walked by him, looking at him as suspiciously as the Aurors, and hurrying on their way, as though worried that they too would look suspicious for being in the Alley.

When he passed the bank, he couldn't help stopping and staring. He'd never seen the great outer doors closed before; they'd always been folded behind the marble pillars supporting the portico. The inner doors, which were the ones he usually used, were impressive enough, Harry had thought. These massive bronze doors were covered, he saw now, with depictions of various wizard-goblin wars, all of the images showing the goblins doing dreadful things to the wizards. As with most magical depictions, whether paintings or photographs, the images moved rather than remaining still. Harry watched with fascination as a pack of a dozen goblins surrounded a tall wizard and beheaded him, then proceeded to hack his dead body to pieces... He swallowed. Binns' dry delivery had never brought to life the utter carnage of those conflicts. He was glad it was burnished bronze and not living color.

He entered the Leaky Cauldron and immediately found Ron and Hermione and Ginny sitting at a table near the dart boards. He grinned at them and strode over, about to greet them just as the door to Muggle London opened, and Draco Malfoy stepped into the pub's dim interior.

Harry's day went downhill from there.

They bought their books, their new robes, their Potions supplies. Every merchant seemed to have a different way of calculating the exchange rate between Galleons and pounds, and many of them, even when they accepted the notes (Ginny had been right — the inflation was outrageous) looked at the bits of paper while frowning deeply, as though Harry might have simply transfigured stray pieces of parchment to look like this. He heard the clerk in the bookstore say, as they left, "I'll tell you one thing, I'll be glad when we can use *real* money again."

At every turn, Harry felt like he was seeing Draco Malfoy whispering in Ginny's ear, grinning mischievously, and Ginny blushing and smiling back at him. He remembered her saying that he was getting far too good at very nearly seducing her. He tried very hard not to let his feelings show, but by the end of the shopping excursion, he was feeling like hitting something (or someone) very, very hard. The feeling he'd had at Hog's End, that he could wait as long as necessary for her, was very hard to maintain when Draco Malfoy was drooling all over her right under his nose.

Hermione looked at him with concern as the five of them sat around a table at Florean Fortescue's, eating ice cream. They were Florean's only customers.

"Are you all right, Harry? You've been clenching your jaw all afternoon. You'll have a terrific headache when you try to get to sleep tonight. And that's really bad for your teeth, as well. My parents see loads of people who grind their teeth like that. It's extremely unhealthy."

Harry grimaced and concentrated on eating his ice cream. "I'm all right", he said, trying not to notice that Draco Malfoy was feeding Ginny a cherry with whipped cream on it. Fortunately, Ron took it upon himself to be peeved about this.

"Oi, Ginny, can't you feed yourself? You have to get that git to help you?"

Draco Malfoy smirked at Ron. Ron glowered back at him. Harry tried to imagine Hermione allowing Ron to feed her like that. He couldn't. He'd never done anything of the sort when he was with her, either. He decided to avert a more severe exchange of hostilities by being the bearer of bad news.

"I suppose I'm a bit tense about the news Sirius and Professor Snape keep dredging up about Annie", he lied, although it was true that it wasn't good news.

He had already told Ginny and Ron about Annie's running away, since Sirius had said it was all right. "What now?" Ginny said, turning away from her boyfriend.

He filled Hermione and Draco Malfoy in on the first news about Annie before telling them all what had been learned when Sirius and Snape had gone looking for the family with the healed dog.

"They're gone", he said simply. They all looked at each other, perplexed.

"Gone?" Hermione said, as though unwilling to believe. "You mean they emigrated or something?"

"No. Actually, from what they can tell, the family never existed in the first place."

The four of them looked at each other in confusion, then back at Harry. "They never existed", Hermione parroted, as though Harry had perhaps meant to say something entirely different.

"Well, after she ran away, police were sent to the house, and the family answered their questions about what had happened and all that. But when Sirius and Snape tried to find where they had moved after they left that house, and they traced the ownership records in the town hall, the person who owned the house at the time that that family lived there said that the house was vacant when Annie disappeared. He didn't manage to lease it to someone else until a couple of months later. There are also no telephone records for the family, or any other type of records. Employment, drivers licenses, nothing. And the sisters at the orphanage insist that they had all of the required papers. The mother and father each had a birth certificate. They had jobs. But when Sirius and Snape checked out that information too, it turned out to all be false. None of it was real."

Ginny looked genuinely alarmed. "Oh, no... It sounds like she was kidnapped *again*, this time by these people who pretended to want to adopt her. That's dreadful. You don't suppose — you don't suppose they — they *hurt* her?" Ginny's real meaning was clear, and it made them all tense up.

"We have no way of knowing. What Sirius and Snape — and I — found very odd was that she'd managed before to get out of situations she didn't like. She seemed to like it fine at the orphanage; she never tried to run away from there, and the reverend mother said that if she was performing her 'miracles', as she called them, while at the orphanage, the other children kept it quiet, and the sisters never saw a thing. She only seemed to do it when she was sent to a family who might adopt her. We prefer not to think she disappeared with this family against her will. She must have wanted to go — wherever they went. I fail to see how someone with her powers, and who was willing to *use* her powers, could be hurt or made to go anywhere against her will by Muggles..." He bit his lip, not saying what he suspected. But Ron caught on.

"They *weren't* Muggles! They must have been a wizarding family! They recognized her for a witch!"

Harry nodded. "We think that's possible. So she might have known she was a witch — and that there's a wizarding community — from about the age of twelve. The question is — if she was taken in by wizards, did she go to wizarding school? She probably didn't go to Hogwarts, because Charlie was still there and he would have recognized her. So — did she go to some magic school abroad, like Durmstrang or Beauxbatons, or perhaps one of the smaller European schools? Maybe a school in America?"

Hermione brightened. "Perhaps, if they find her, she wouldn't need to be told she's a witch — just that she's a Weasley!"

Harry sighed again. "It's easier said than done. Sirius and Snape aren't convinced the family gave their true name to the sisters at the orphanage. It'll be like looking for a needle in a haystack. We don't even know that they stayed in this country, or Europe, or in this *hemisphere*. And she's owl-proof. We're really no closer than we ever were to finding her."

He pushed back from the table, not interested in finishing his ice cream. He tried not to notice the way Malfoy draped his hand over Ginny's shoulder, or the way she shivered when his fingers brushed her neck... He clenched his jaw again, feeling the beginning of the headache that Hermione had warned him about...

He was glad to get back to Ascog. Somehow, Ginny confessing that she really loved *him* and was just acting when she was around Draco to protect him had had the effect of making him even more discontented with his life (at least when he saw her with Malfoy). When the Sunday before the wedding finally rolled around, he realized that he was dreading this, dreading seeing Ginny walking down the aisle as one of Alicia's bridesmaids, dreading standing up with Roger Davies, of all people, dreading seeing her at the party after, not daring to dance with her or take her in his arms...

I'm in for a week of torture, he thought, wondering if he could find some excuse for backing out now. But he could think of nothing, and he dutifully packed and prepared to step into the fireplace to travel to Alicia's parents' estate in Sywell, Northamptonshire. She had had the fireplace in the lodge, where she was living, connected to the Floo network; since she was a witch, the Ministry had allowed it. (She'd asked about connecting

her parents' house, but they had refused.) When he fell out of the fireplace at Alicia's, clutching his bag, Alicia was waiting for him.

"Harry!" she gushed, hugging him and kissing him on both cheeks. She then held him at arm's length, her golden hair pulled into a sleek chignon at the nape of her neck. She looked very elegant in a champagne-colored skirted suit and pearls, very smart and grown-up, and Harry suddenly felt like an eleven-year-old again, stammering out his hello. She tucked her arm into his, leading him outside to her car. "Thank you *so much* for agreeing to do this, Harry! You're the last one in the wedding party to arrive. Everyone else is up at the house; I think father has them all in the drawing room, having a sing-along and generally being loud. He always seems to think he's campaigning. But it looks like he actually has a very good chance at a seat in Parliament. Isn't that wonderful?"

Harry nodded as he sat in the car and closed his door. "Fantastic", he said unenthusiastically. She kept up her animated chatter as she drove up the gravel drive to the manor house, and Harry watched with envy some horses running in the paddocks, wishing he were as free. But he'd signed on to be held prisoner in a country house for a week, and there was no getting out of it now. He smiled feebly at Alicia as she continued to talk, not really hearing her words and trying not to feel empty and trapped.

The entrance hall was very grand, with an enormous vase of blowzy roses on a large round mahogany table in the center of the space. The floor was a complicated pattern done in encaustic tiles and a pair of grand stairways wound up both sides of the room, disappearing up into the grand house. Through a curtained archway Harry could hear a crowd of people singing along with a piano: *Rule Britannia*. They couldn't complete the song and it degenerated into laughter. Alicia gave his bag to a prim-looking maid and told her what room to take it to. The maid disappeared as swiftly as any house-elf and Alicia led him to the drawing room.

The drawing room was enormous. It would have held six Ascog Castle sitting rooms, if not more. There were several groupings of squashy couches and armchairs in a variety of patterns that somehow harmonized, numerous Persian rugs, and in general a shabby-genteel English country house look and feel that communicated both money and a carelessness about money that only the very rich could afford. The grand piano was in one corner, being manned by Alicia's father, who seemed to be quite accomplished, and a fine baritone, too. He recognized the Weasley twins,

standing beside Ginny. Hermione was already there as well, and Angelina and — he swallowed — Katie. (He knew he had to have a certain conversation with her, and he was dreading that, too.) There were some other people too, but Harry couldn't see everyone in the crowd around the piano from his lurking position near the doorway.

"I have a million things to do", Alicia whispered to him. "Make yourself at home", she said, as though *that* was ever going to happen, before disappearing between the curtains again. Her father started playing the introduction to a song, with a lot of ornamentation, saying, "Now, I want to hear the little lark Alicia said is singing for the wedding. Where is she?"

Then Harry saw her; Ruth bashfully raised her hand and Harry couldn't help grinning. He knew what a wonderful voice she had, and he was pleased to find out that she would be here too. The introduction ended, and Mr. Spinnet nodded at her, "I think you know it. Everyone does."

She nodded and immediately started singing the sweetest rendition of *Danny Boy* that Harry had ever heard. It made his throat ache to hear her, it was so beautiful, and he remembered feeling the same way about the singer who had played Dido when he'd been to the opera in Hogsmeade. Then a tall blond man next to her, with a close-cropped beard and bright blue eyes, smiled at her and whispered in her ear. She nodded, and then he joined her, his tenor voice amazingly high, as, in a unison that sent chills up Harry's spine, they went up, up, for the climax of the song:

*"... But come ye back when summer's in the meadow
Or when the valley's hushed and white with snow
'Tis I'll be HERE in sunshine or in shadow..."*

They sounded amazing together, and as they finished the song more gently, the man harmonizing with her now, everyone in the room seemed to be holding their breaths, until they both finished holding the final soft, tremulous note, and Mr. Spinnet moved his hands up the keyboard, playing the cadenza with a delicate flourish. A moment later, the silence in the

room was rent with deafening applause; Ruth colored prettily at the acclaim, and the blond man looked very pleased both with her and with himself, grinning at the reaction.

The blond man's reaction changed abruptly when Mr. Spinnet began to play the introduction to *With Cat-like Tread*. He shook his head vigorously, frowning.

"Oh, no you don't —"

"Oh, come on, you know you want to. A little G and S never hurt anyone..." Mr. Spinnet teased him playfully.

"No," the man insisted adamantly. Mr. Spinnet changed abruptly and started playing the introduction to a different song.

"I think you mean yes. Ambrose told me you never could say no to *this* one..."

The blond man laughed now, hearing it. "You've got me there. All right, all right", he relented, and Harry wasn't quite sure what he would hear. He could have been knocked over with a feather when, a few moments later, he heard a very familiar falsetto singing a song he still heard sometimes in his nightmares...

"*I'm called little Buttercup, dear little Buttercup, though I could never tell why...*"

Cathedral

Harry crossed the room, a feeling of urgency in his bones, while the man was still singing, the falsetto grating on him as it had in prison. When he reached the piano he halted, glaring at the man, who abruptly ceased singing, looking at Harry with an extremely alarmed expression. Harry could see him swallow.

Mr. Spinnet didn't realize immediately that he'd lost his singer; he continued playing for several bars before stopping and saying, "What's the matter, old boy? Cat got your —" Then he noticed where the man was looking; he jumped slightly when he turned and found Harry standing very close by. "Oh, hello there. Didn't see you come in. What's your name? Do you know everyone?"

Harry didn't take his eyes off Buttercup. "What are you doing here?" he ground out. The room was very still. The man swallowed again; beads of sweat were visible on his brow.

"Why shouldn't Roger's cousin be here? He's also singing for the wedding. And his mum's matron of honor. And you are —?" Alicia's father prompted him again. Harry looked at him now, frowning slightly. He was pink-cheeked and had waving light-brown hair and opaque blue-grey eyes. There was a very slight touch of grey at his temples. Harry thought he looked like many, many politicians he'd seen on television and would blend right in if he were elected to Parliament.

"Harry Potter", he said now; he couldn't ever remember having to introduce himself in the wizarding world before (at least, not in this life). Of course, this wasn't technically the wizarding world, even with so many witches and wizards about, and Alicia's father clearly did not immerse himself in news and information about the world in which she had lived since the age of eleven.

"Ah, yes! The last groomsman. Welcome, welcome! We've been having a ripping time here —"

But Harry saw that Roger Davies' cousin was still regarding him with a touch of fear; then he remembered that in *this* life, Buttercup might not have done anything that warranted his going to prison. He had been on the verge of asking him how he'd gotten out of Azkaban, and was very glad he

hadn't. And even though he had been sent to prison, he reminded himself, that didn't have to mean that he'd done anything very bad. *I was in there for killing my mum, but I was also protecting Ron's life. He might have been in there for a similar reason. Sam Bell was.*

And then he remembered something else; Sam had described the cramped, combined accommodations for prisoners like him who weren't serving life sentences. Harry was unusual; he was in solitary confinement even though he only had a five-year sentence. It was for his own protection. Other people in solitary were likely to be there for more dire crimes — and they were likely serving life sentences. Life sentences were mandatory for the Unforgivable Curses.

But here he is, Harry thought. *Free and getting ready to participate in his cousin's wedding.* He looked around at the others surrounding the piano now; there was Oliver, whom he hadn't noticed before, and Lee, who nodded at him. He also saw Cho Chang, but he looked away from her before she met his eye.

Hermione moved toward him, frowning, only to find that Katie was also moving toward him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ginny looking concerned and reining herself in. Harry thought quickly and grabbed Hermione's hand before Katie could get to him, saying, hurriedly to Mr. Spinnet, "Will you please excuse us for a moment?"

He saw Katie frowning and stopping herself from continuing toward him while he dragged Hermione from the room, back out into the grand entrance hall. She staggered after him, nearly tripping twice and righting herself. He was aware of a score of eyes boring into the back of his head. Once they were in the hall, Hermione pulled her arm from his grasp and pushed her disheveled hair from her face.

"What's going on, Harry?"

Then he saw the nasty scab on the side of her face, running along her left cheekbone and into her hair, above her ear. It didn't look deep; it was a dark maroon color, only slightly raised, and when she saw him looking at it she hastily arranged her hair over her cheek again. He stepped close to her and held her right shoulder with his left hand, then pushed her hair back behind her ear again and looked closely at the wound. She didn't move, but looked into his eyes fearfully.

"I could ask the same thing, Hermione. Where'd you get this?"

Their faces were very close; she pressed her lips together, then said, "On my trip."

He brushed his fingers over it lightly; it was slightly rough under his touch. "Why didn't you let McGonagall heal it, then? It wouldn't take much."

She swallowed. "I — I didn't want her to know about it. I told her I hadn't had any problems —"

He frowned. "What? Weren't you together?"

She shook her head. "In her cat form she would have been considered food for the animals I was bonding with. I needed to go off on my own and find a group to accept me and let me live with them for a while. I had to maintain my Animagus form the whole time. It was exhausting. And then — then I got lost on the way back to Professor McGonagall. I wandered into this village — a town, rather — and — and —"

He put his hand on her cheek gently. "What?"

She swallowed. "A man saw me and — and he shot at me."

"Shot at you!" He was appalled.

"The bullet only grazed me!" she said quickly. "It was easy enough to hide it with my hair and some makeup, so I didn't show the wound to Professor McGonagall. I knew she'd blame herself. After the bullet grazed me, I ran behind a building and transfigured back into my human form. He came looking for a — an animal, and found me instead. I told him I'd seen it running off, and I pointed, and he went in the direction I'd said. He didn't suspect a thing, of course. I didn't let him see the side of my face, or he might have thought it odd that he'd just grazed an animal in that very spot, and here was a girl with the same kind of wound... I found a telephone and managed to call the little inn where Professor McGonagall was staying, so she could come and get me."

"Where was this?"

"Out west", she said vaguely. "I started off in Saskatchewan, actually, and wound up in northern Montana. Evidently, I had traveled quite a distance with the — the other animals. It's just a scratch, and it should be fairly inconspicuous by the wedding. It would have attracted a lot more attention if I had a huge bandage over it. *Don't* tell Ron, whatever you do. He'd go mad with worry —"

"And what about me?" he demanded. "You go off to America, or Canada, or whatever, and nearly get yourself shot and killed, and I'm not

supposed to care? You act like it's nothing! What kind of animal is this, anyway, if people are just shooting them in the streets in America?"

She looked very grim. "It was a frontier town, Harry. Yes, they still exist. Mind you, they also have televisions and computers and carry telephones on their belts. They don't live in the past. Most people live on ranches miles from the town and just go there to do some shopping or pick up the post. They have to worry about wild animals attacking them or their livestock. Everyone has guns in their cars or trucks. Rifles, really. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but since this is the way you're reacting, can you blame me?"

They were still very close. He looked down at her, trying not to feel worried and failing. He was on the verge of saying, "If I'd known what you were planning to do, I wouldn't have let you go", but there wasn't any "let" about it. He was her friend again, not her boyfriend. And even when he *was* her boyfriend, she wouldn't have accepted being ordered about by him.

He reached into his shirt and pulled out his wand. Instead of saying what he thought, he said, "Here", very softly; "let me; it'll just take a moment." He touched the wand to the wound and smoothed it over the surface; tiny bubbles emerged from the tip, as though it was trying to emit champagne. The bubbles were flattened under the stroking, smoothing wand, and soon her skin was clear and free of the scab. The new skin was, however, a bit paler than that around it, which was tanned. Harry remembered the gash of white on Draco Malfoy's leg where his stepfather had healed the boy's wound at the seaside.

"That's a bit better. Now you just need to use the makeup to even out the skin tone, and no one will be the wiser", he said softly. She gazed at him, still a little fearful.

"And you won't tell Ron?"

He sighed. He didn't like this. "Well — can I assume that you were shot at because you're an animal that can hold its own against a werewolf?"

She gave him a small smile. "You could say that. Thank you, Harry." She stood on her toes and kissed him on the cheek.

"Now, now, is that a proper greeting for your best friend?" he asked mischievously, taking her in his arms and hugging her firmly.

She hugged him back, saying into his shirt, "I've missed you, you know." Then she backed up from him, although their arms were still around each other. "And now that I've told you about being shot at, perhaps you could tell *me* about that little display in there. Have you met Roger's cousin before? What could you possibly have against him?"

He sighed. "It's a long story, and one I was hoping to tell you and Ron together, after the term starts, although now... Right now, let's just say I don't trust him and it wouldn't surprise me to find out that Aurors are looking for him."

"Aurors! Why on earth would you say such a thing?"

Harry grimaced. "Of course, for that matter, I don't really trust Roger either, so —"

"Oh? Why don't you trust Roger?" Harry looked up, reddening; Alicia was standing on the stairs, looking down at the two of them. "And before you talk about not trusting other people, may I point out to you that you're holding your *former* girlfriend rather closely, that her *current* boyfriend — your best friend — is conveniently not here at the moment, and *your* current girlfriend — who also happens to be a good friend of mine — is right through those curtains?"

Alicia crossed her arms and looked at the two of them with a raised eyebrow. Harry and Hermione stepped away from each other awkwardly; Harry thrust his hands deep into his pockets and Hermione didn't seem to know what to do with her hands, but finally decided on folding her arms across her chest, like Alicia. She was very red.

"I just — I just don't trust him not to go looking for you on the wedding day", Harry lied, hoping it was convincing. "You know that superstition about the groom seeing the bride before the ceremony. But Roger probably won't be able to resist —"

Alicia gave him a reluctant half-smile; he wasn't sure she believed him, but she seemed to have a grudging respect for his being able to think quickly. "I see", she said, not sounding completely convinced. He hoped she would be unwilling to accuse him of lying to her.

She started down the stairs, but Harry said, "Actually, I've had a tiring day. Perhaps you could show me my room and I can rest a bit before dinner?"

Alicia turned and went back up the stairs, not saying a word, Harry and Hermione following her. She led them to a large chamber with two beds,

one of which was liberally decorated with clothes spilling out of an open suitcase on a rumpled duvet; the other bed was made up neatly, with Harry's bag sitting at the foot. With her hand on the doorknob, she said tersely, "You're in with Oliver, which you can probably tell, given the mess." She turned to Hermione and asked, "Do you want to see your room, too?"

Hermione nodded. "I wanted to practice a little, in private."

They left and Harry threw himself on the bed, lying with his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling.

Buttercup. Buttercup is here.

There were too many questions for his brain to handle. *What did he do in my other life to land in Azkaban? Was it just bad luck, like with me, and Sam? Is he involved in criminal activity now, and he just hasn't been caught? Is he perhaps even a Death Eater?*

He sat up on his elbows, remembering Roger Davies pursuing him in Fraserburgh when he landed there after escaping Azkaban. Roger was a Death Eater in that life. In this life, his brother had attacked him and others in the forest, as though he sympathized with the Death Eaters. And why should he sympathize? Why, because he'd found out his big brother was a Death Eater and he aspired to follow in his footsteps. And perhaps Roger was a Death Eater because of this cousin...

Brilliant, Harry thought. I'm supposed to stand up with a Death Eater at his wedding, and listen to his cousin the Death Eater sing, and watch the Death Eater groom marry a friend of mine, all as though nothing is wrong.

Then he realized that it was odd that a Death Eater should be marrying a Muggle-born witch, or "Mudblood."

But was he going to just marry her? Was she marrying him of her own volition?

Or was Alicia in very grave danger?

He sprang from his bed and returned to the corridor, walking from door to door, calling softly, "*Hermione! Hermione!*" trying to find her room. Finally, he heard her cello and followed the sound to a door near the end of the passage, just before a swinging frosted glass door that seemed to lead to the service stairs. He cautiously opened the door from which the music was emanating and found her sitting in a chair near the window, bowing

frightfully fast, practicing going up and down the scale, her left hand a blur on the strings.

"Hermione!" he called to her, making her jump. A moment of painful noise leapt from the cello as her bow scraped across the strings awkwardly.

"Harry! Don't *do* that! You almost made me break the bow, or a string, or something!"

"I'm sorry, Hermione. But — but I have to talk to you. I think I need to tell you some things *now*, especially with Buttercup here. I can't wait for Ron —"

"Especially with *who* here?"

"With —"

"*Speaking* of not trusting people", Alicia was saying, bursting into the room suddenly as though they had never paused in their earlier conversation, "have you read this issue of the *Daily Prophet*, Harry? Because you know what they say about *glass houses*..." She sounded very suggestive.

Then she left again, throwing the paper on one of the two beds and looking at Harry and Hermione as though she fully expected them to start shagging as soon as she was gone. Harry locked the door after her, then went to the bed to look at the paper and find out what she was talking about.

HARRY POTTER POSES
POSSIBLE SECURITY PROBLEM
AT QUIDDITCH MATCH
by Daisy Furuncle

At the recent semi-final Quidditch League match between the Holyhead Harpies and the Chudley Cannons, held at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, there was a disturbance before the match caused by none other than Hogwarts' new Head Boy, Harry Potter.

"I didn't cause a disturbance!" he said testily. Hermione looked at him, frowning.

"What on earth are you reading?" She put her cello down on the chair carefully and crossed the room, sitting next to him on the bed and looking at the article with him.

Potter was detained by Aurors who were screening spectators as they entered the stadium. Before Potter reached the front of the queue, he was heard questioning the Ministry's decision to continue to hold Quidditch League matches, since so much security is necessary to ensure the safety of all attendees. Potter called the matches a way to "pacify everyone", and added, "This way, they can simultaneously occupy people with mindless sport and make it look like the Ministry's really doing something, just because they're checking over everyone who's entering the stadium. I'm sure they're really going to get to the bottom of the Diagon Alley attack by doing that." He also called the policy to continue to hold matches, "bread and circuses."

"I didn't say that! Well, yeah, I said the part about bread and circuses, but Ginny said the other things —"

"She shouldn't be saying that where she can be heard! And neither should you!"

"That's what Ron and I said! I mean about what Ginny said. But apparently, it was too late by then. And now *I'm* the one who's supposed to have said all of it! And — and it sounds much worse than it did at the time... and it sounded bad *then*."

"You do realize what this means, Harry?" Hermione prompted him. He looked at her and shrugged. "It means that Rita Skeeter is *not* Daisy Furuncle."

"Or, like Sirius said, there's more than one. Blimey; how many people have I hacked off? How many times this summer am I going to be — to be —"

"I believe the words you're looking for are 'pilloried in the press'," Hermione said helpfully. He made a face.

"I don't think I've ever used the word 'pilloried' in my entire life."

"Well, you should start, because it's the best description *I* can think of for what Daisy Furuncle is doing to you. Anyway, there's more."

Harry sighed. "Isn't there always?"

Hermione took the paper from him and read, "*Ludo Bagman, who was once accused of being a Death Eater, saved Potter from further questioning by the Aurors after Potter whispered something in Bagman's ear. Whether this is a secret password for members of an underground society to recognize one another is unknown.*"

"Oh, please!" Harry exploded, glaring at the words on the paper.

"*After the match, Owen Aberystwyth, captain of the Welsh national team, was seen speaking to Potter. Rumors that Potter may replace Audra Griffiths, the late Welsh Seeker who coincidentally perished in the recent attack on Diagon Alley, have yet to be confirmed.*"

He scowled. "They're trying to make it sound like *I* killed her or something, to have a chance at the team!"

"Oh, Harry! Is there any grain of truth to that?"

He looked at her in shock. "Of course not, Hermione! How can you ask me that?"

"No, stupid", she said, swatting him on the arm. "I meant the part about you possibly being on the Welsh national team."

"Oh. Sorry. Actually, for once, a small grain of truth. But I still need to try out. I sent Hedwig to Little Whinging, so Aunt Petunia or Uncle Vernon could send me my birth certificate, to verify that I was born in Wales and that I'm of-age, but she hasn't come back yet. She might come find me here, I suppose. Ron's thinking of trying out for an opening on the English team. Reserve Chaser."

He thought she'd be thrilled about this, but she frowned deeply. "Is that quite fair? With his, erm, special abilities? And aren't there a lot of night games, for security? What if it's — the wrong time of month?"

Harry shrugged. "I reckon he'll discuss all of that with the captain. It won't really matter unless he makes it through the trials, anyway. They might be very tough. In fact, they probably are."

She nodded, still looking thoughtful. "I don't know about this... I know Ron would be thrilled, but if he made it, he'd be in the public eye quite a bit. And that would have been fine before, but *now*..."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, Harry, you know the way Remus has lived for years! That horrid night-watchman's job at that warehouse. Never enough money, all of it. Just because he's a werewolf and most witches and wizards are so stupid and prejudiced..."

"It'll be fine, Hermione. Don't fret over something that hasn't happened yet."

She still looked vaguely discontented. "And then there's *you*. You'll make a lovely target, you will, flying around at a World Cup game..."

Harry rolled his eyes. Hermione would never understand Quidditch. "It's the European Cup, Hermione. And that's why they're checking everyone going to the matches. You should have seen all of the Aurors in the stadium; they were everywhere. Listen, when we get to school I can show you the game, since you missed it. It's recorded on my Omnioculars." She rolled her eyes.

"I can't wait", she said sarcastically. He laughed.

"No, you might really like this. The Harpies are an all-witch team, after all. And were they *brilliant*! Don't tell Ron I said that", he added sheepishly. She laughed.

"A turncoat, are we? Tired of crossing our fingers and hoping for the best?" she said smiling wickedly, paraphrasing the Chudley Cannons' motto.

"Well, it was pretty clear the Harpies were going to win, wasn't it? A pity the cup final is the same day as the wedding. I know what *I'd* much rather be doing..."

They were silent for a moment while Harry thought about having to be in a stuffy church in formal clothes instead of watching what promised to be a spectacular final between the Harpies and Puddlemere United. Hermione perused the Daisy Furuncle article again, frowning, then looked up from the paper and said to him, "You said you wanted to tell me something. That you didn't want to wait for Ron. And you were going on about 'Buttercup'. What was all that?"

Harry swallowed. Would she believe him as readily as Ginny? He had no idea, but he had to try. "Yes", he began slowly. "You see, I've met Roger's cousin before, and he sang that song all of the time and wanted to be called Buttercup, so that's the name I know him by."

"Where was this?"

He paused, breathing deeply through his nose. "Azkaban", he said finally.

She raised one eyebrow and looked at him blankly. "Azkaban", she said, incredulous. So once again, he went through the chain of events, the not-sleeping, followed by Voldemort influencing him to perform the spell which took them back through time. Hermione, however, was stuck on the sleeping problem.

"Harry! You *never* try to think clearly or make snap judgments when you haven't had enough sleep! Didn't my experience in third year teach you anything?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"When I was using the Time Turner. *You* remember how I was. A bit mad. Doing things I normally wouldn't have done. A loosening of inhibitions. I mean, no matter how much I longed to tell off Professor Trelawney from day one, I would never have done it if it weren't for my lack of sleep. And while you and Ron may not need an excuse like that to hit Malfoy, it's really not in my nature to just walk up to someone and smack him, no matter how much of a git he is." She grinned now. "Not that I've ever *regretted* hitting Malfoy..."

Harry laughed. "Who would?" She laughed guiltily as well, then sobered.

"I don't suppose you want to tell me how you went from saving your mother to being in Azkaban?"

He drew his mouth into a line. "Not at the moment, no", he said, swallowing, trying to prevent the image of his mother lying dead at his feet from creeping into his brain again. "What I did — I received a five-year sentence. But there was a worry about — about my safety —"

"I should think so! You were only sixteen! And they were proposing putting you in with hardened criminals —"

He shook his head. "No, Hermione. You don't understand. Azkaban isn't like a Muggle prison. The 'hardened' criminals are all crouched in corners, gibbering incoherently. Some of the other details I'll tell you and Ron together. The thing is — they put me in solitary, to protect me, and in the cell across the corridor from mine was *Buttercup*."

Her jaw dropped in shock. "Roger's cousin was in Azkaban?"

"Only I didn't know he was Roger's cousin. I didn't know much about him at all. I eventually found out that his father was an itinerant actor and

his mum was a witch. I didn't even know his name, but one day I called him 'Buttercup', just because he was singing that stupid song so much, and he finally spoke to me and told me about his parents and why he sang Gilbert and Sullivan tunes all the time."

She looked completely incredulous now. "Okay, Harry. You let Voldemort convince you to save your mum because you weren't sleeping. I believe that. You went to Azkaban. Less likely, but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. But how could a person in Azkaban, with those dementors all around, still be happy enough to sing Gilbert and Sullivan all the time?"

"You're assuming he *liked* singing Gilbert and Sullivan."

"Oh", she said simply, frowning. "So he didn't."

"Hated it. He seems to have made his peace with the Buttercup song, though. In this life. But did you hear the way he objected to the other one?"

She nodded, still frowning. "That's true..."

"Now, here's why I'm very, very concerned. Even though I was in solitary with just a five-year sentence, as far as I know, all of the other prisoners there had life sentences. That means Buttercup must have done an Unforgivable Curse, or killed a lot of people, like they thought Sirius had done. Unfortunately, I never did find out what his specific crime was, or how long he'd been in there. None of that. *And*, in that life — Roger Davies was a Death Eater."

"He was?" Her eyes opened wide in shock.

"He was trying to track me down after I escaped from prison —"

"Why should a Death Eater be tracking you, instead of Aurors?"

He looked at her grimly. "They both were." He saw understanding dawn on her face.

"That's why you were in solitary, wasn't it?" He nodded. She stood and began to pace, her hands on top of her head; he could see how fiercely she was thinking. Suddenly she stopped and faced him.

"Since there was such a to-do when Sirius escaped, I think it's fair to assume that he didn't go to Azkaban in this life, and that he didn't escape. Sirius was said to be the first person who'd ever done it."

Harry shook his head. "That's because Sirius was the first one who'd done it that they *knew* about. Remember, years ago, Barty Crouch and his wife helped their son escape, and they did it so cleverly no one was the wiser. When you think about it, Sirius was downright amateurish about it.

Not that I can pass judgment; I escaped in exactly the same way. *And* the same thing happened — it was all over the wizarding and Muggle news, and I was hunted from Fraserburgh to Dover. No, the Crouches were frightfully clever. And if *they* could pull a switch like that, who's to say it's never been done before or since? We can't assume."

She frowned again. "All right. But we know his name. Wouldn't people notice if someone with the same name as an Azkaban prisoner was just out in the world *doing* things?"

"Maybe. It depends. Since he's a half-blood, and it seems that he traveled about quite a bit and lived in the Muggle world, he might not have very much to do with wizards."

"But wouldn't his wizard relatives, like the Davies family, know that he was sent to Azkaban?"

He thought again about the man's face. Something about it wasn't right. "Not if he didn't give his real name when he was arrested. He might have given a false name, confessed to whatever charges they brought against him, and escaped, while making them think they still had him in prison..."

Hermione shook her head. "I think you're getting a bit far-fetched now, Harry. And I say that having heard about the time-travel and everything. It's probably more logical to assume that he didn't go to prison in this life. It would be far more plausible."

Harry finally conceded this. "The trouble is — he's the sort of person who *could* do something that would land him in solitary in Azkaban. He's capable of it. I mean, how likely would it be for two prisoners to be across the corridor from each other, both framed? Although, technically, I wasn't framed... At any rate, I'm just saying that in a world where Voldemort never fell, he did something dreadful enough to go to prison. Perhaps the only reason he's not in prison in this life is that Voldemort fell before he could find himself in a situation where he was tempted to do that dreadful thing. But now that Voldemort is back —"

Hermione sat down on the bed next to him again. "I see what you mean. Of course, if *he* was the one who'd fixed the timelines and remembered you from that life, he might assume the same thing about you, Harry. After all, *you* were in solitary in Azkaban."

"I was a strange case. Like I said, how plausible would it be for two of us to be in a similar situation? I just don't see it. Most of the people who

were in there *belonged* in there. I'd be very careful around him, if I were you, Hermione."

She shrugged. "You'll be having a lot more contact with him than I will, Harry. And Roger, too. I mean, you've got your fitting tomorrow, and the stag party later in the week. Haven't you checked your timetable?"

"My *timetable*?"

She walked to the desk by the window and came back with a neatly-printed grid that looked as though it was computer-generated. Harry raised his eyebrows.

"Alicia is as orderly as ever, eh?"

Hermione nodded. "She's my role model as Head Girl."

"Ah, but she's with her former Head Boy now." Hermione blushed.

"I meant the way she ran the prefects' meetings and things like that, Harry."

"You mean the way she emasculated Roger at every turn? Oh, very charming. I'm really looking forward to the new term now."

She threw a pillow at him, laughing. "Yes, well, don't take any personality lessons from Roger and I won't have to emasculate you, will I?"

He grabbed another pillow and hit her back. She looked shocked, but quickly recovered, and soon they were laughing hysterically and thwacking each other with the pillows repeatedly, until they collapsed in a tired heap on Hermione's bed, breathless. Harry landed face down, his head near the foot, while Hermione was lying the opposite way. He looked down at the time table that had fallen on the floor, forgotten during their roughhousing. He picked it up, groaning.

"What?" she wanted to know, moving to the end of the bed.

"According to *this*, tomorrow all of the groomsmen are going to London to be fitted for our wedding clothes."

She shrugged. "I told you. So what? The bridesmaids are doing that as well. Lucky me! I get to decide on my own clothes. She tried to sell me on dressing like one of the bridesmaids, but I explained to her that I already had an ensemble that was designed to allow me to play the cello, and a long tight skirt wasn't part of the plan. It looks like a floor-length skirt when I'm just standing about, but it's actually divided. The best of both worlds, trousers and skirts."

He shook his head. "Well, while you're wearing something like trousers, *I'll* be busy wearing a *skirt*."

She laughed, her brow furrowed. "What?"

He showed her the time table for the groomsmen. "Oh", she said, a smile curling at the edge of her mouth. "I hadn't noticed that before." He strongly suspected that she was thinking of his legs.

"Right", Harry sighed wearily, falling back on the bed again. "On the day of the wedding, I'll have to put up with Buttercup, who may or may not be a dangerous criminal; I'll have to put up with Alicia and everyone else believing that damn article in the *Daily Prophet*; I'll have to stand up with Roger-bloody-Davies as a groomsman on the last Saturday of August — *and* I'll have to do it all while wearing a — a *kilt*."

* * *

"*You shall change*," Sandy had told him as he washed his hands, preparing to go down to dinner. He frowned. Did that mean he was going to need to perform the Animagus transfiguration for some reason? He really shouldn't, he knew. Not away from school, even though he was of-age. He wasn't going to be registered until after the end of his seventh year. He shrugged. Sandy must have meant something else.

Harry was about to enter the dining room when one glance through the curtains in the doorway informed him that he was woefully underdressed. He swiftly ducked into the hall, whispering to Sandy, "If you meant I *should* change, I wish you'd said that, instead of saying *you shall*," he said irritably. She didn't answer. He decided to transfigure his shirt into a dinner jacket, and his vest into another shirt, with a green tie already tied around his neck. He also decided, as he would be seated much of the time, that his trousers would do.

As he finished adjusting his magically-enhanced clothes, Sandy said, a little testily, "*I was right, wasn't I?*" He didn't answer her.

"Harry!" Alicia cried when he finally entered the room, with a smile that didn't extend to her eyes. He looked around nervously; again, he was the last to arrive. "There you are. I've put you here, between Hermione and Cho."

Brilliant, he thought, taking his seat, giving Cho a small smile which she returned briefly. Mostly, he thought she looked sad. He had a sudden thought. *That's terribly tactless, to ask someone to be in your wedding just after she's lost her second boyfriend in as many years.*

Frightfully crisp and precise servers brought the food around, and when a plate was put in front of him, Harry leaned slightly toward Hermione and asked her, "Erm, what is this?"

"Aspic", she said out of the corner of her mouth. "It's nice. An acquired taste, perhaps. You should try it to see whether you like it."

He looked down at the array of forks to the left of his plate. The other diners had started to eat, and a low murmur of dinner conversation started up at the table. "Which fork do I use?" he asked her now, trying not to move his lips.

"Start from the outside and work your way in", was the hushed reply, as Hermione took a bite of aspic from her fork.

Right, he thought, picking up the outermost fork. However, one taste of the aspic, and he had a problem. He held it in his mouth, not chewing; after a few minutes, his eyes started to water. Hermione looked at him, then away, then did a double take, her eyes widening as she saw the look on his face.

"Do you have a problem, Harry?" she whispered, lifting her wineglass to drink.

"You could say that", he said, pushing the offending piece of food into his cheek with his tongue so he could talk. This unfortunately brought it into contact with his tastebuds again. "I can't stand it", he whispered.

She grimaced. Still behind the cover of her glass, she said, "Don't be a baby. Chew and swallow, and then don't eat anymore."

What he really wanted to do was spit it out into his napkin, but he had the distinct impression that that would be frowned upon. He tried to swallow it without chewing, so he wouldn't have to taste much of it, and almost gagged. He started coughing very loudly, and Hermione had to pound him on the back and thrust his water glass at him, which he gulped greedily. When he was composed again, he saw that everyone at the table was looking at him. He smiled feebly, muttering, "Just went down the wrong way. I'm fine now."

The conversational murmur started up again after that, but Harry had noticed who was sitting across from him now.

Ginny.

She looked at him desperately, as though worried that he might really be choking to death. He found that he couldn't not look at her; he gazed

into her large brown eyes and felt lost in them, felt like he never wanted to look at anything else.

He thought Hermione a bit rude for kicking him in the shin.

Harry bit his tongue, rather than call attention to himself again. He frowned at Hermione, but she was gesturing with her head to a person sitting across the table. To Ginny's right was Lee, and on Lee's other side was Katie. She was looking strangely at Harry. Then, when she realized he was looking back, she colored deeply and turned to Fred, on her right, asking him something Harry couldn't hear. He looked down at his plate of uneaten aspic. She'd seen him looking at Ginny. She seen the emotion on his face. *She knew.*

He spent the rest of the dinner studiously ignoring both Katie and Ginny, feeling that this was the safest course of action. He tried engaging Cho in conversation once or twice, but she was chatting in a subdued manner with Oliver, on her left, and seemed to be ignoring *him*. Mr. Spinnet stood after they were done their puddings and addressed them all, thanking them for coming to help celebrate his daughter's marriage (it sounded rather like a campaign speech) and suggesting they move to the drawing room for coffee and cognac.

Harry didn't want to go to the drawing room; he just wanted to go to sleep. He especially didn't want to socialize with Cho or Buttercup, and Alicia was getting on his nerves now, too (although he felt more charitable toward her and was willing to excuse it as prenuptial nerves). He quietly explained to Hermione that he was going upstairs, and she nodded before following Ginny into the drawing room with the others. He slipped into the entrance hall and started up the stairs to his room, but a moment later he heard a voice behind him.

"Harry!"

He turned; it was Katie. She was wearing a peach-colored sheath that made her tan look very pronounced. Her hair was pulled up in a loose twist at the back of her head but some tendrils had escaped and lay on the nape of her neck. He swallowed, wishing she didn't have to look so pretty just now. He stood half-way up the stairs, drumming his fingertips on the banister waiting for her to catch him up. *We have to get this over with*, he thought. He knew he had to break up with her, make it clean. He shouldn't continue to let her think he was even *trying* to get over Ginny, because it would be a lie, and he *knew* it was a lie now. He had been blind and stupid

and hadn't known, before (or hadn't wanted to admit it to himself), but now — now he had no excuse.

"Katie", he said slowly as she climbed the stairs, her heels clicking on each step. *We have to talk*, he was going to say. Then he thought, *Oh, that's dreadful. Everyone knows that nothing good ever comes after that...*

"We have to talk, Harry", she said, now standing on the same step with him. He had opened his mouth to speak, but she had beaten him to it, and he snapped it shut again, feeling rather stupid.

"Er, sure. Let's go upstairs." He looked around the entrance hall; since reading the most recent *Prophet* article, he'd felt more paranoid than ever, expecting someone to be listening to him every moment of the day. She followed him up to the room he was sharing with Oliver Wood; just as he put his hand on the doorknob, his jacket suddenly reverted to a blue shirt, which he was wearing unbuttoned over his thin cotton vest, rather than a white button-down shirt with a green tie. There was no tie at all. Harry looked down, embarrassed. Katie frowned.

"I — I hadn't really brought anything appropriate for a dressy dinner, so I transfigured my clothes before I went into the dining room. It was a sloppy spell, obviously. Already worn off." He hoped she didn't think he was disrobing, that he had designs on her (especially after her saying, *We need to talk.*) He opened the door and as she closed it, he hurried to button his shirt, so his vest was no longer exposed.

He waved to a chair, but she stood near the door, looking like she wanted to bolt any second. "Harry — I need to talk to you because — because I don't think this is working out. You and me. I mean, we started off with my dad fixing us up, and then you moved to Scotland, and you're going back to school soon, and I'm starting Auror training, and — and I just don't think it's working. I'm sorry, Harry."

She finally met his eyes. She'd been looking all around him while the words came tumbling out of her mouth, as though she was afraid to look straight at him. He nodded, glad that he didn't have to do it.

"I understand", he croaked. Well, he thought. At least we're in agreement. "I'll — I'll miss you."

She smiled. "Well, we're both staying in the same house for a week. But — I think we should probably spend our time with other people, if you know what I mean."

He nodded. "Right. Of course."

She put her hand on the knob and turned to go, but looked at him again first. "Harry — I really am sorry this didn't work out." She seemed to have let her guard down now, and Harry gave her a feeble smile. Her hazel eyes were just a little shiny.

"Me too", he said softly. Then she was gone.

He undressed and turned off the light, deciding that Oliver could bloody well find his way to bed in the dark. He let a single tear fall in mourning for what he and Katie might have had were it not for all of the other complications in their lives. Wiping the tear away, he rolled over, punching his pillow, trying not to *think*. His exhaustion finally overwhelmed him and he fell into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

Harry never understood how he survived to Friday of that week. He withstood being fitted for a kilt in the tartan of the Davies family, plus the other gear to go with it; he withstood a cocktail party to which Mr. Spinnet's many political supporters had been invited, honoring his daughter and her fiancé. He had hoped to talk to Roger's cousin at the party, but the man always seemed to find a way to avoid him. He withstood going to the races on Wednesday, trying not to remember when he'd been there with Draco in his other life, cheering on Alicia to her win on Granny's Ghost. *That* Alicia had been much less annoying, in his opinion. This one he barely recognized. He was starting to feel very sure that she wasn't marrying Roger of her own volition, her personality seemed so altered, but he didn't know to whom he should talk about this. Hermione seemed to have noticed nothing wrong, and he was afraid she'd think he was mad and becoming as paranoid as Moody.

She had accepted his not telling her more about his other life yet, as he wanted to tell her and Ron other details with the help of the Pensieve. She was one of the few people he wasn't avoiding (like Ginny, Katie, Cho, Alicia and, when he was at the house, Roger), but she needed to spend a good deal of time practicing the cello, so he often found himself wandering over the grounds aimlessly, hands sunk deep in his pockets, having rambling conversations with Sandy and wishing he'd had the nerve to say `no' to Alicia's request to be a groomsman.

He didn't really want to avoid Ginny, and had to force himself not to send stupid lovesick stares her way at meals, but he was afraid that if they were alone together he would be tempted to do something which, if

Malfoy saw it while holding the basilisk amulet, would mean an all-out declaration of war.

He understood now why she'd kept her feelings from him for so long; he was going mad knowing that she loved him and that she knew he loved her, but they couldn't even sit beside each other or hold hands. He didn't remember things being so difficult for him, somehow, when he thought she loved Draco Malfoy.

The rehearsal dinner was Thursday night. That afternoon, Angelina had presided over the hen party, and Harry had escaped the house to avoid the chorus of oohs and ahs over the gifts the women had given Alicia and Roger. He went running around the paddocks, sometimes racing with one of the Spinnets' horses, for fun, and rested, eventually, far out in a field so distant from the big house, all he could see around him was green grass, hedges, some fences and hot, blue sky.

The next morning, at breakfast, Harry received a very rude shock when he entered the dining room and discovered the last person he wanted to see sitting next to Ginny, contentedly eating bacon and eggs and talking to Oliver Wood about Quidditch.

It was Draco Malfoy.

He looked levelly at Harry, a challenge in his eyes. Then suddenly, he grinned and laughed. "I hear you're all wearing kilts, Harry!" he said cheerfully. "I'd have brought mine if I knew. Ah, well. We can get Davies good and pissed tonight and he won't have any bloody idea what he's agreeing to tomorrow at the church."

Harry smiled feebly. Next to Malfoy, Ginny laughed and looked every bit his happy companion, so that Harry almost wondered for a moment if he'd dreamt that night at Hog's End, telling her about his other life, her telling him she wasn't in love with Draco Malfoy. He tried to ignore her, so he wouldn't seethe, walking to the sideboard and getting a plate for his food.

"I didn't know you were coming, Draco", he forced himself to say as he put some kippers on his plate from a silver salver.

"Well, Ginny arranged for me to come for tonight — I can come along for the stag party — and then I'm staying over for the wedding tomorrow. I'm going to kip on a camp bed in Fred's and George's room. Ron's here too; he already finished eating and he and Hermione have gone off somewhere. He's going to be in with you and Oliver."

Harry felt very petty as he mouthed the words, *Ginny arranged for me to come for tonight* with his back to them. He arranged his face into a smile before turning around, saying, "That's nice. Fred and George were speculating that Oliver would know the best way to do — erm, to do *this*."

Ginny looked wickedly at Draco Malfoy now. "Well, good. That'll keep you boys occupied while we keep Alicia busy, having her last wild night before the ceremony —"

"Hey!" Malfoy responded, although he was laughing. "You girls already had the hen party, you said."

"*This* isn't a hen party", Ginny said, her voice *very* suggestive. "It's more of a distaff version of what you all will be getting up to."

"Oh", said Oliver, sitting across from her and eating some toast with marmalade, "so you're going to get Alicia pissed and see if she'll make a pass at a stripper? Roger might like to see that, actually."

Ginny frowned, confused. "Why would Roger want to see her with another man the night before their wedding?"

"Oh", Oliver said again, with an expression of complete innocence. "I wasn't talking about a *male* stripper." He started laughing then, and Malfoy joined in. Harry sat next to Oliver, thinking about half-heartedly joining in with the laughter, but changing his mind. Alicia came sweeping in then and they sobered, although Harry saw Oliver sending merry looks at Draco Malfoy, like they were part of the same conspiracy. Which they were, Harry reckoned. Why did he feel like he was on the outside looking in? he wondered. He should be looking forward to this. And yet —

"I feel like doing some riding", Alicia announced when she was done her breakfast. "Would anyone else like to come along? Some of the horses could really use some exercise."

"Yeah, I'd like that", Draco Malfoy said, finishing his tea. "Haven't been riding in ages. We used to have some nice horseflesh. I rather miss that", he added a little wistfully, and this time, when Ginny looked sympathetically at him, Harry wasn't so sure it was an act.

Harry rose to leave, feeling a bit grumpy. "I've never ridden, so I suppose I'll pass", he said before leaving the room. He strode up the stairs, two at a time, and almost ran over Hermione as she was coming out of his room.

"Oh, there you are, Harry —"

"Hullo", he said, surprised to see her. "Where's Ron? I thought you two had gone off together."

"He was feeling a bit grimy and wanted to take a shower, so I cleaned a lot of the girly things out of our bath and he's using it now. You must have used it earlier, when we were eating breakfast. Was Oliver using yours, or something? Anyway, I didn't know whether you'd already gone down to breakfast, so I was looking for you to give you this." She was holding one of the basilisk amulets by the chain; it swung back and forth, catching the morning light. Harry frowned.

"Why are you trying to give me that?"

"I found it in the bath, on the counter next to the sink. You must have forgotten it when you took your shower."

Harry shook his head. "That's not mine anymore, remember? That's Ginny's. I never took mine off when I had it, anyway."

She swung it up so that it landed in her hand, and she hefted it, feeling its weight against her palm. "That's right, you didn't. Well, almost never", she added, reddening, evidently remembering when *she* had asked him to take it off. She closed her hand around it and then froze, startled. She closed her eyes for a moment and her mouth dropped open in surprise. "Oh..." she said slowly. Harry furrowed his brow, wondering why she was doing that. She used to look that way — she used to look that way when he was her boyfriend, and especially when he was *doing* certain things to her... He opened his eyes wide when he realized the cause of her reaction.

"*Hermione Granger!*" he said, shocked by her behavior.

Startled, she opened her eyes, still grasping the amulet. "What?" she said quickly, looking very guilty. But Harry saw that she was still grasping the amulet. He held out his hand and tried to look very stern, hoping he wouldn't start laughing. She grimaced and put it in his hand. He clasped it and closed his eyes for a moment, seeing Ginny and Draco Malfoy and Alicia walking across the lawn, talking casually. He opened his eyes again.

"Ron's still in the shower, isn't he?" he said pointedly, still being the disciplinarian. She was turning *very* red now, and he could see her swallow. He was having a *very* difficult time now keeping a straight face. "Get a good look, did you?"

She was clearly very irked. "I didn't know that's what I'd see! I didn't know I'd see *anything!*"

"Well, you continued to look even after you knew, didn't you? That's called an invasion of privacy, I believe, Miss Granger." He felt a smile pull at the corners of his mouth, and opened his eyes wide, trying to suppress it.

She looked at him with narrowed eyes. "And *you've* never used it that way, I suppose?"

He looked at her guilelessly. "No. Not once." *That* was the truth. He was tempted to finally let himself smile, but then he didn't feel very much like smiling. Suddenly, he had a terrible thought: Draco Malfoy could see Ginny any time. That meant *any time*. He thought for a moment of Ginny taking a shower, remembering her standing under the warm spray in the Quidditch changing rooms the morning after that dreadful storm...

He put it in his pocket. "I'll take this to Ginny", he said. "You go practice cello and let poor Ron shower in peace. When he's ready for you to see him in the shower, I'm sure he'll let you know." He tried to put Malfoy out of his mind and continued to rather enjoy winding up Hermione.

"But — but —" she sputtered. "What *is* that thing? What does it do?"

Harry looked up and down the corridor, then hustled her into his room. "I'm not sure what it is", he whispered to her, after closing the door. "I can only tell you what it *seems* to do. When you held it, you saw Ron. Not just an abstract Ron, like a photograph you might keep on the mantle. But Ron right now, what he's actually doing this very minute."

"Right —"

"Now, when I hold it, I see —" He swallowed, looking down at it, wondering whether he should say. And then it turned out that he didn't need to.

"You see Ginny, don't you?"

He looked up and nodded at her, feeling like a fist was clenching his heart. She put her hand on his arm sympathetically. "I'm not blind, you know. And you should bear in mind that Draco Malfoy isn't, either."

He sighed. "I know." He looked down at the amulet in his hand again. "That's why I'm taking it to her."

Suddenly she had put her arms around him and was hugging him tightly. She backed up a little, stood up on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. "Poor Harry", she said softly, a pity in her eyes that he didn't like. He stepped away from her.

"You'd better go practice. I'll take this to Ginny."

When he reached the front door, he clutched the amulet again, seeing Ginny talking to Alicia while standing next to a strawberry roan with a snow-white mane and tail. Alicia was patting the horse and Ginny was nodding. She had bundled up her hair so that it was a mass at the back of her head. Alicia helped her adjust the chin strap on the black dome of a riding helmet she'd put on, and then gave her a leg up. Ginny put her foot in the stirrup and swung her other leg over the horse's back, sitting uncertainly on the roan, holding the reins, and Alicia's head was near her knee, talking again. Harry assumed that Alicia had given her the jodhpurs she was wearing.

Then Alicia disappeared and Draco Malfoy moved into sight, also wearing jodhpurs and a riding helmet, mounted on a large chestnut. His body moved easily with the horse's, a complete natural. Ginny looked far less natural on her mount. Their horses walked side by side at a slow, easy pace, Ginny holding the reins nervously, and then Alicia was beside them on a black-maned piebald steed which looked far too large for her to control, but which seemed to be obeying her every whim. She had also bundled up her hair and wore a helmet and jodhpurs. The three of them sped up a little as they left the cobblestone-paved stable yard. Harry remembered Malfoy's Alicia-on-a-horse fantasies, and wondered if they were coming true. Except now he was probably having Ginny-on-a-horse fantasies. Harry put the amulet back in his pocket and sat on the front steps that led down to the drive, deciding that he didn't have to give it back to her right away. Soon they would be galloping across the paddocks, and he wouldn't be able to reach her anyway.

Growing restless after a while, he finally decided to walk down to the stable yard to wait for them instead of sitting in the sun on the front steps. The yard was orderly and well-kept, with a couple of grooms bustling about, tending to the horses. Harry walked idly from stall to stall, looking at the handsome beasts, then stopped when he saw a familiar face.

"*Magic Man*," he said softly to the horse with the lightning bolt blaze between his eyes. *What do you know*, he thought. He patted the horse's neck, smiling grimly, and fed him a carrot one of the grooms had handed him, with an admonition to be careful of his fingers. Sighing, he leaned against the gate to Magic Man's stall and put his hand in his pocket again, feeling for the amulet. He closed his eyes and could see Ginny quite

clearly; she and Draco were not on their horses any more. He could see the horses' legs, so they were somewhere nearby; Ginny and Draco were on the ground, their helmets on the grass next to them, and Alicia was nowhere in sight. Draco Malfoy was kissing down the side of her neck while she threw her head back in abandon, and his fingers were deftly unbuttoning her blouse. Harry's mouth went dry when he saw this.

Damn. They'd managed to shake the chaperone.

Just then, Alicia came walking into the stable yard, leading her horse by the reins. "Knox! Knox!" This seemed to be the name of one of the grooms. Harry wasn't sure where they'd gone, but they had seemed quite busy. He put the amulet back into his pocket and walked out into the yard to meet her. She looked startled to see him.

"Er, hullo, Harry", she said, her voice shaking. "Ali Baba's gone lame. I had to walk back." She cleared her throat and called the groom again. "Drat!" she added. "Where is that boy?"

"So", he said, trying to sound as though it didn't matter a great deal to him. "You left Ginny and Draco on their own?"

She shrugged. "He's an experienced horseman. We talked about that on the one date we had. You know; the ceilidh. The one I asked you to, and you turned me down. Remember?"

"I remember", he said. "How could anyone forget being kissed by you?" he added, intentionally stroking her ego.

He smiled at her now; for someone about to be married, she suddenly seemed very insecure, and in *need* of having her ego stroked. As the groom she called hadn't answered her (Harry suddenly felt very superstitious, wondering whether this was a bad sign), she led Ali Baba into his stall and continued talking to Harry while tending to the horse herself.

"Yes, well, there are very few men whom I've kissed, but you *are* one of them. Glad to know it was memorable, especially as you were secretly seeing Hermione at the time and probably snogging her senseless every chance you got, if not shagging."

He frowned; now she sounded bitter. She'd been having frequent mood swings during the week, which he'd put down partly to nervousness about the wedding, and partly to the suspicious nature of the wedding.

"Of course", she went on, "I thought I was going to the ceilidh for *Draco* to be able to dance with *Hermione*, not with *Ginny*..." She spread a

blanket on Ali Baba and patted his side affectionately, giving him some sugar cubes from her pocket and stroking the long nose gently.

Harry was utterly confused now. "You *what*?"

She emerged from the horse's stall and closed the gate securely behind her. "He asked me to go to the ceilidh and said it was very important to him because he was seeing a girl in Gryffindor, and they didn't want anyone to know about the two of them. He said Ron would be especially upset if he knew. Well, it didn't occur to me he meant Ginny. I just couldn't picture her doing that, knowing how much bad blood there was between their families. You don't have to be wizard born to know about *that*. I naturally assumed it was Hermione, if Ron was supposed to be upset. I mean", she said, rolling her eyes, "he was *completely* obvious at the Yule Ball."

They walked back out into the yard and sat on a bench pushed up against the grey stone of the stable. "He was actually very sweet, going on about his girlfriend, saying how smart she was, top marks in her year. As he'd had the good taste to choose a Gryffindor, and as I assumed it was Hermione, and that Hermione wouldn't be with anyone who was unworthy of her, I agreed to do it. You and Hermione *did* say you were going just as friends. I believed you. Then, at the ceilidh, when Draco and Hermione went off to dance together, and she made that crack to the Malfoys about *her* parents being dentists, I was certain I had been right. I mean, you were so *obviously* trying to pair off Draco and Hermione. And I assumed that's why you were surprised he'd brought me; knowing his father didn't want his son with a Muggle-born, to camouflage a secret relationship with Hermione with a date with another Muggle-born seemed rather guileless. He did switch to dancing with Ginny, but I thought that was just to throw off his father.

"You could have knocked me over with a feather when, after the Quidditch final, there you were on the pitch, kissing Hermione, while Draco Malfoy was kissing Ginny Weasley! Until then, I rather thought *you* fancied Ginny." He didn't comment on this. She laughed and shook her head. "It's a good thing Katie's the one who's going to be an Auror. I'd be dreadful."

Then, with absolutely no warning, her lips were suddenly on his and her tongue was pushing insistently at his mouth. He sprang to his feet, definitely not interested in giving in to temptation this time.

"Alicia! Stop that! You're getting married tomorrow!"

She raised her eyebrows. "Right. Tomorrow. So shouldn't I have as much fun as possible today? Oh, speaking of Katie, did I mention that she told me she'd broken up with you?"

"No, you didn't, but that's not why I'm —" His eye was caught by something; he looked at her now, at her boots. They were quite clean. His own shoes were rather muddy from his walk down to the stables; it had rained overnight and the ground was still damp. He saw her shoes, the ones she'd worn at breakfast, sitting against the outer wall of the stable next to what he recognized as Ginny's shoes and Draco's shoes. All three pairs of shoes were as muddy as his. *Of course*, he thought. *They changed into riding boots after they reached the stables.* He had seen an array of boots lined up inside the stable, below some pegs with extra helmets. And she had said she was walking Ali Baba into the stable yard because he was lame... But he wasn't, Harry realized. He wasn't lame at all.

"Ali Baba isn't lame", he said with certainty. She looked at him with her jaw dropped. He pointed at her boots. "There isn't a speck of mud on your boots. If you'd walked your horse all the way back, they wouldn't be so clean. You only walked from just outside the stable yard, didn't you?"

She looked down at her boots now, in shock. "Bloody hell. You're good, Harry. Oh, I just wanted Fred and George to think they had someone with them, you know. They still treat her like such a child! I wasn't expecting *you* to be here. I decided that, in case anyone asked, I had come back because of a lame horse. I didn't want the twins trying to beat Draco to a pulp. Please don't tell them. Draco and Ginny are really very sweet together, aren't they? I'm sorry for being a romantic..."

He plunged in. "Such a romantic that you're marrying someone you don't love?"

She froze, then her eyes iced over. "What makes you say that?"

He sat very close to her now. "Maybe it's that you didn't tell your two best friends you were even *seeing* Roger. They didn't find out until you sent your *wedding invitations*! Maybe it's that I don't think you've been seeing each other very long, and you're already getting married. Maybe it's that I never saw you even be *civil* to Roger Davies until last spring when I was reading to your class at the village school, and then, out of the blue, I saw the two of you *kissing* in your classroom, before Disapparating. Fleur was looking for him that day, and I lied to her and told her I hadn't seen

Roger. So he was obviously still seeing her — or so *she* thought. That day I saw you do two uncharacteristic things: you were kissing someone I could have sworn you hated, *and* you were being the 'other woman'. Somehow, I thought that only an Alicia Spinnet who was not in control of her own actions would do these things. Unfortunately, I didn't come to this conclusion until later, when — when there were just too many things happening to deal with it."

She swallowed and looked at him. "I'd made no bones about not liking Roger when I was in school, that's true. I didn't know how to tell Katie and Angelina I'd had a change of heart. I was afraid they'd laugh at me. And then there was the original reason why I went after Roger..."

"You went after him? Not the other way around?" Harry was skeptical.

"Yes. When Roger started seeing me behind Fleur's back — it was just because I didn't like her. All right, couldn't *stand* her would be far more accurate. Ever since she came here... Well, that's a long story. Anyway, I went after Roger. Made a big show of burying the hatchet, all that. It worked. And Roger —"

"— wouldn't believe you any more than I do. Why are you marrying him, *really*?"

She had her mouth open, then closed it again. Finally she gave him a steely gaze and said, "You wouldn't understand, Harry. There are a lot of reasons two people might get married. I have my reasons, and I don't have to justify myself to you. I have my eyes wide open and I am *going* to marry Roger Davies tomorrow."

He looked at her shrewdly. "Now I believe you. That you have your reasons, and that *you* believe you know what you're doing. However — when I saw you two kissing in that classroom, *that* didn't look like someone who would say, 'I'm with Roger because I have my reasons;' that looked like someone who was acting blindly. Someone who was under a curse or a spell or the influence of a potion. You may be acting freely *now*, but I don't believe you were then. And I have a very bad feeling that if Roger has convinced you that he's not up to no good, you've made a very big mistake to believe him. Evan died because he aspired to be a Death Eater, he wanted to do something that would get him noticed by Voldemort." He noticed that, as a Muggle-born witch, she didn't wince at the name. "Roger was blaming me, but I had the distinct impression he was really blaming himself and just lashing out at me. I think Evan found

out his big brother was a Death Eater. You're not safe, Alicia. You *can't* marry Roger."

She crossed her arms. "When you're *quite* finished, Harry", she said, "I would like to ask you just *what the hell are you talking about?* Roger, a Death Eater? Did you hit your head or something?"

"Have you ever seen him with his clothes off?" She hesitated, and Harry had a feeling she hadn't. "You haven't, have you? Waiting for the wedding night? How traditional."

She looked very offended now. "Of *course* I've seen him with his clothes off! Don't be daft. All right, I'll bite — how can you tell a Death Eater when he's not dressed?"

He looked at her; she didn't know. She really didn't know. Was Roger all right? Did he not have the Dark Mark? He couldn't decide whether she was incredibly thick or an even better actress than Ginny.

Alicia didn't wait any longer for an answer. She retrieved her shoes and removed her boots with a jack while talking to him. "I think you need to go have a lie-down, Harry. I am marrying Roger tomorrow. I am not under Imperius. I am not under any other spell. I am not being influenced by a potion. Just because I kissed you — well, isn't it normal for a nervous bride to be thinking about all of the boys she's kissed before and never will again? I'm sorry I startled you. It was a stupid impulse. It doesn't mean I don't want to marry Roger. In fact — I've quit my teaching job and Roger and I will both be working on getting my father elected to Parliament. We're going to be married *and* working together. Oooh, he's a Death Eater, you say. Yes, every day Death Eaters marry Muggle-born witches and work to get their fathers-in-law elected to Parliament. *Very* likely. I'll see you at lunch."

She turned and started walking away from him, but he caught up to her and grabbed her arm, turning her around. "Alicia", he said urgently. "What will happen if you *don't* marry Roger?"

She suddenly looked frightened, very frightened, and he knew he was onto something. Yes, she *was* marrying him of her own free will. Because she was trying to avoid something worse. (Harry tried to think of something worse than marrying Roger Davies, and failed.) What was she afraid of?

But her face had closed up again. She glared at Harry. "What will happen is my father will have paid thousands of pounds for the perfect

wedding for no bloody reason, *that's* what. And I will tell you this now, Harry Potter", she hissed between her teeth. "If you do anything — *anything* — to make tomorrow less than *completely* perfect, I will hunt you down, torture you, and *kill* you. *That's* a promise."

She turned on her heel and marched out of the yard, leaving Harry standing, staring after her, completely stumped. Against his better judgment, he wrapped his hand around the amulet in his pocket again, despite telling Hermione he didn't do that sort of thing, but instead of seeing Ginny succumbing to Draco Malfoy, he saw her buttoning her blouse, standing, and screaming silently at the blond Slytherin. Draco Malfoy seemed to be screaming right back. She clapped her helmet on her head and struggled to get back into her saddle again. Looking annoyed, Draco helped her, appearing to be continuing to give her an earful. They were riding along again after he leapt effortlessly into his saddle, and then he saw Malfoy reach out and give Ginny's strawberry roan a great *slap!* on the rump.

Suddenly, the horse reared, while Ginny held onto the reins for dear life; then it was galloping as if running for *its* life, and Harry's view of her moved along with her. He could see how terrified she was, pulling at the reins to get the horse under control, but it still ran on, and now she was sinking her hands into the mane, horror distorting her features. Finally, the horse stopped abruptly, and he saw her body go flying from the saddle, and then her figure lying on the grass, her eyes closed, her limbs splayed out around her.

Nooooo! his brained screamed.

He couldn't see Draco Malfoy anywhere near her. Harry couldn't take this. He stuffed the amulet into his pocket and ran into the stable; he started to move toward Ali Baba, but the animal backed away from him. Two other horses clearly recognized his agitation and moved to the backs of their stalls as well. When he came to Magic Man, however, he was able to open the stall and bring the animal out with no problem. He looked around for a saddle, but didn't know where they were kept, or, indeed, even how to properly attach one to a horse. He gave up and led Magic Man out to the yard, using a mounting block to jump onto the horse's quivering back, holding onto his mane tightly with his fingers.

He held onto the horse tightly with his knees and pressed his heels into the horse's sides and told him, "C'mon, boy. We've got to find Ginny." His

voice shook, and when he smacked him smartly on the rump, as Malfoy had done with Ginny's horse, the horse abruptly galloped out of the stable yard and toward a large fence with a stile. Harry swallowed, his fingers holding the mane securely, his thighs already aching from gripping the horse's body with them. He stared grimly at the fence, and then a moment later, he felt the horse gathering himself to jump. When he did, it was amazingly like flying, Harry thought. They landed with a thud on the other side, and continued galloping across the paddock, Harry's teeth chattering in his head.

Harry wasn't sure how long he had looked for Ginny and how many miles he'd ridden when he saw Malfoy's abandoned chestnut steed about a quarter-mile away in the next paddock. He clicked his tongue at Magic Man, who resumed galloping, and soon, Harry was jumping over the fence into that paddock, feeling much more natural about this after the sixth or seventh time. Ginny was lying on the ground near the chestnut, not moving that he could see. He leapt onto the ground from his bareback mount and his tired, aching legs collapsed under him. He crawled to Ginny's side.

He took off her helmet and patted her cheeks gently. "Ginny! Ginny!"

She opened her eyes groggily, giving him a small smile when she saw him. "Harry", she said softly. "Oh, good. I seem to have fallen from my horse..."

She sounded delirious; he asked her desperately, "Do you think you've broken anything? Does it hurt more in one place than another?" He began feeling her limbs gently, holding her wrist between his fingers, gently touching her knees, her ankles. She groaned.

"No", she managed to say. "I don't think I've broken anything. I just ache all over. It is a good thing I had the helmet on, though. My head feels like it's exploding."

He was afraid that meant she had concussion. He helped her to sit up; her back was covered in mud. "I think it was the damp ground that saved you", he informed her, although he wondered how much of that was from her lying on the ground earlier with Draco Malfoy. He decided not to say anything about that. After all, she *hadn't* succumbed, clearly. When he'd seen her in the amulet, on the out-of-control horse, it was from the front, so he hadn't known about the mud.

"Where's Malfoy, anyway? He's just left you here? Did he take your horse? His is still here."

She shook her head. "I don't know where mine is. Ran off. He didn't want to waste time riding back for help, he said. He was going to Apparate to the lodge and bring Alicia back with her car."

He helped her to stand, shakily. "I'll take you back. You can ride with me. That all right with you?"

She looked at him with her mouth open slightly, and it took all of his willpower not to pull her to him and start kissing her desperately; she looked like she might be having a similar thought. She swallowed.

"All right."

He took out his wand and made a piece of earth rise up next to the horse, so he could use it as a mounting block. Ginny nervously stepped onto the raised earth. After leaping onto the horse's back, he reached down from his seat on Magic Man and put his hand around her wrist. "Hold onto my arm. Come on; I'll pull you up."

"I don't know, Harry..." she started to say, although she did hold his wrist, as he was already holding hers.

Suddenly, he'd already pulled and cried "*Accio Ginny!*" at the same time, to help it along, and now she straddled the horse, sitting behind Harry, one arm wrapped around his waist. "Hold on tight", he told her, putting his wand away, so she put her other arm around him too.

"Harry", she said nervously, "this horse doesn't have a *saddle!*"

Harry urged Magic Man on and he started galloping across the damp earth, his hooves raising great clods of turf. Harry turned slightly and smiled at her. "You've ridden a golden griffin without a saddle."

She laughed and held him more tightly, leaning her head on his shoulder. "It was lovely, too", she said in his ear. "Much less bumpy."

They rode back in silence; Harry loved the feel of her pressing against him, warm and solid and *Ginny*. She was all right, that was the important thing. He couldn't prevent the image he was seeing in his mind's eye, Ginny being thrown from the horse and lying on the cold, damp ground, so still... He'd thought — he'd thought the worst. *And it would have been all Malfoy's fault*, he seethed. But as they galloped on, and he felt her warm breath on his neck and her body pressed against his back and her arms around his waist, he calmed a bit. *I've got you, Ginny. You'll be all right now.*

* * *

Ginny was given a clean bill of health by the doctor, who said she did not have concussion. She was to rest during the remainder of the day, however. Harry wanted to sit by her side in the drawing room, at her beck and call, but Draco Malfoy was doing that instead. Hermione and Ron had gone for a walk on the grounds, and he felt utterly superfluous.

Finally, the time came for them to leave for the stag party. Harry was not looking forward to this. He hadn't been able to talk to Roger when he'd been fitted for his kilt, as Roger hadn't gone with them. (Mr. Davies had taken them to London.) And Roger's cousin had been managing to avoid him as well. He knew he wouldn't get the opportunity to speak with them quietly during the evening's scheduled debauchery, and he was starting to feel more and more that the wedding should *not* go forward...

When he returned to the Spinnet estate with the others, as the only one who had decided not to drink (even Ron had had a pint) he felt very restless, pacing back and forth in his room, thinking furiously, while Oliver snored loudly, grunting and making other noises occasionally which made Harry wince. Ron, at least, was sleeping quietly on the camp bed.

Near dawn, he finally fell asleep. When Ron woke him, the room was bright with late-morning sunshine, and his best friend was laughing at him. "Harry! Get up already! What's your excuse? I didn't see you drink anything last night."

Harry rubbed his head. "It's a good thing, too. My head feels bad enough without adding alcohol."

"Well, although I'm a lowly guest and not a member of the wedding party, I've been dispatched to get your lazy bum out of bed and see to it that you are arrayed in your Highland regalia for photographs. Everyone's waiting."

"What time is it?"

Ron checked a carriage clock on the mantle. "Eleven. Workmen have been clearing all of the furniture out of the drawing room for three hours already. That's to be the ballroom. And a huge tent is being erected on the lawn for dining. You've missed all the excitement."

Harry swore. He didn't exactly agree with Ron's assessment. "The wedding isn't until four o'clock! We're going to spend five hours taking photographs?"

"No", Ron said. "The groomsmen are going to be photographed, then eat lunch. After lunch, Alicia and the bridesmaids are going to have their

hair and makeup done to be gorgeous, and then *they'll* be photographed. Then we all get into cars to go to Kettering. I'm riding along with the musicians: Hermione and Ruth and Roger's cousin. He's a nice bloke. He'll be driving us."

Harry said, "Hmph!" but didn't elaborate. Somehow he managed to drag himself to the shower and then donned his gear for the wedding. It was the worst of both worlds. He had a stiff white shirt front, white tie and tails, and an itchy wool kilt. *It's the last Saturday in August!* he thought, not for the first (or last) time. Ron grinned when he saw him.

"I have to say, Harry. You *don't* look very happy."

"Yeah, well, maybe that's partly because I'm wearing a wool kilt in August, but it's also partly because Alicia should *not* be marrying Roger Davies."

Hermione knocked on the door, which was slightly ajar, and entered without waiting for permission. "What did you say about Alicia not marrying Roger?"

He had her lock the door and he told both of them about his conversation with Alicia the day before. Ron whistled. "I don't know, Harry. I'd take that part about her torturing you and killing you *very* seriously. Girls can be *completely* irrational about wanting perfect weddings."

Hermione bristled. "There's absolutely nothing irrational about it", she said stiffly. "Many girls start dreaming about their weddings when they're very young..."

"My point exactly", Ron said, rolling his eyes.

Harry started pacing again. "She's worried that something dreadful will happen if she doesn't go through with this — I'm sure of it. How did she seem last night, Hermione?"

Hermione snorted. "You don't want to know."

"No, I really do. Did she seem happy about the wedding?"

Hermione frowned. "Hard to tell. She became pissed *very* quickly and started telling old Quidditch stories. Oh. My. God. I thought the pair of *you* were bad about that. She kept saying to Angelina and Ginny and Katie, 'Remember that game against Hufflepuff *when...* Remember that game against Slytherin *when...* I don't know when I've been more bored in my *life*. It almost drove me to drink."

"You mean you didn't?" Ron asked her, as though doubting this.

"Ronald Weasley! Of course I didn't."

"Yeah, well you had wine with your dinner, I noticed. Before you went out."

"That is a glass of wine in a private home with a large meal. I've also had wine with dinner when I'm at home with my parents, on special occasions. That is hardly the same thing as ordering hard liquor in a public house at the age of sixteen. For one thing, the publican could get in a great deal of trouble."

"Er", Harry said, before she could continue this diatribe, "how was the rest of the evening? When Alicia wasn't talking about Quidditch, I mean."

Hermione started ticking off points on her fingers. "Well, let's see. Angelina must have had too much to drink *before* she left, because I didn't see her drink anything at the pub, but she kept running to the loo and spewing anyway. Yarrow kept complaining to me about her break-up with Fred — I *really* don't care for her — Cho didn't seem to drink anything, but she kept going on these crying jags and wanted to talk to me about Viktor. Erg. And then *Katie*..."

Harry frowned. "What?"

Hermione reddened. "Well, she was pretty pissed as well. *She* kept cornering me to talk about *you*."

Ron raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

Hermione was growing redder by the second. "She, er... she wanted to compare notes, you might say."

Now Harry felt *his* face grow warm. "Good Lord", he breathed. "You *didn't* —"

"Of course I didn't!" she exclaimed, her voice a trifle squeaky. "I mean — that is the *last* conversation I want to have *ever*. Well, it's a draw. I didn't want to talk to Cho about Viktor, either." She sighed. "That had to be one of the most uncomfortable nights of my entire *life*. Oh, and Ginny didn't help. She was being so *silly* —"

Ron looked alarmed. "You didn't let her drink, did you?"

"Of course I didn't, Ron! What do you take me for? No, she didn't need any help from alcohol; Alicia had given her some pain pills earlier, because of that fall she took yesterday. She had some more this morning. That's why she was being so giggly at breakfast. I'm not sure what Alicia gave her, but I don't think she should have any more. How did the stag night go for you and the lads?"

Ron groaned. "Not much better than your outing. Let's see; Roger was pissed and kept calling everyone 'old boy'; Fred and George kept trying to give Muggles Canary Creams; and Harry and I had to keep intercepting them, so they wouldn't get in trouble. Lee was trying to sell the publican on carrying their product line, which, luckily, the man thought was a drunken rant. Actually, it was a drunken rant. Malfoy kept going on about how much money he used to have. You'd think when he's drunk he'd be improved, but he's just a bore. Percy eventually showed up and helped keep the twins in line, luckily. That was one good thing. And if there's one thing I can say for Perce, he can hold his liquor, although I think he had more than a pint. Let's see, what else... Oliver made a pass at the wife of a lorry driver, who threw a chair at his head. He must have weighed twenty-five stone, this bloke..."

Hermione laughed. "And most of them had terrible headaches at breakfast this morning. Did you see Oliver? The way he winced when anyone made the slightest bit of noise? I'm glad you two had the sense not to drink."

It was Ron's turn to become slightly red; Harry had the feeling he wasn't going to tell her about having the one pint of stout.

"No strippers, then?" Hermione asked suggestively.

"Not a one", Ron sighed. Hermione swatted him.

"You're not supposed to sound so disappointed."

He grinned. "You're not supposed to be so gullible." That earned him another swat. He pretended it hurt.

Someone knocked on the door. "Ron! You were supposed to get Harry to come downstairs!" It was Roger.

Harry strode to the door and opened it. "Sorry, Roger. Hermione was just telling me and Ron about the girls' night out."

He raised his eyebrows, looking interested. "Oh? I haven't heard anything about it yet. Anything juicy?"

"Er, not really. If you want to hear Alicia go on for hours about Quidditch, just give her a little too much to drink. That's evidently the result."

Roger grinned. "That's the result when she's with a pack of women", he said suggestively. Harry wondered again what Roger was holding over her head, but he seemed perfectly happy and jovial, getting ready to be married. If he was a Death Eater now, and somehow blackmailing Alicia

into marrying him, it ironically had made him a much more pleasant person to be around. Harry didn't know what to think.

The afternoon sped by, and Harry thought he would go blind from the number of times he saw the camera's flash. Finally, at three o'clock, they piled into cars to drive to Kettering. The church was bedecked with more flowers than Harry had ever seen. Everywhere he looked, he saw white roses surrounded by thistles and greens, and tartan ribbons hanging down from the arrangements.

Promptly at three-thirty, Hermione began playing her cello. Harry smiled, watching her. He sat in the front row with Roger, Fred, George, Lee, Oliver and Roger's father. Harry turned and saw Ron sitting several rows back on the bride's side with Percy; they were both watching her play, but Harry could see that Ron was following every movement she made. Much of the time, Percy was listening with his eyes closed, a placid smile on his face. They looked rather foreign in their stiff formal clothes; Hermione had been admiring Ron in his before they left. Harry had never seen him look so adult. It was hard to equate with him with the eleven-year-old he'd met on the Hogwarts Express. Ron had been admiring Hermione's outfit as well; she was wearing what appeared to be a long silky purple dress, but she had given a little kick, showing them that the skirt was really very full trousers, allowing her to hold her cello easily. The bodice was rather tight, with a low draped cowl and full, translucent elbow-length sleeves.

"Thank goodness I do *not* have to wear a bridesmaid dress", she had said, rolling her eyes. Harry hadn't seen the dresses; after his stint in front of the photographer had ended, he had gone back up to his room for a nap. It was also clear that she was very pleased by Ron's reaction to her appearance (which was, for lack of a better word, gawping).

Hermione and the singers took turns performing before the ceremony. In addition to Ruth and Roger's cousin, a baritone and alto from the church choir sang; the four performed several madrigals without accompaniment, their harmonies tight and perfect. Harry smiled when he heard Ruth's perfectly round tones; her clear, high voice was most easily heard of the four, and he almost found it possible to forget his other concerns as he listened.

Finally, Hermione and the singers sat in the pews and the organist began playing. Roger gestured to his groomsmen, and they all stood with

him before the altar rail, looking to the back of the church. Harry had heard the guests entering, but he hadn't realized how full the church was getting. The organ stopped suddenly, the priest entered and stood next to Roger, and someone opened the doors at the rear of the sanctuary. The organ started up again, a huge fanfare this time, and an older woman Harry now knew to be Ambrose Davies' sister (mother of Buttercup) began walking down the aisle in a matronly dress the same shade as the thistles she carried amongst the white roses. Angelina followed, wearing a dress of the same color, but a slightly different style. It appeared to have a halter top, although Harry couldn't tell very well by seeing it from the front. She wore a wreath of thistles on her hair. Katie followed, wearing the same wreath of thistles and a version of the same dress that was appropriate for her height, her tanned arms fully visible. Harry met her eyes for a moment, but she quickly looked away. Yarrow followed, tall and stately, then tiny Cho. Lastly, Harry saw Ginny walking down the aisle, dressed the same as the other girls, but somehow... Somehow it all looked so very different on *her*, Harry thought. Her arms were pale and freckled, not tan, her long red hair had been pulled up into a loose arrangement on her head, topped by the thistles, but some long curls ornamented her bare shoulders, and her thistle wreath sat on her hair with a slightly rakish tilt, as though her hairpins had come loose. He thought it was possible that she was holding her bouquet of roses and thistles upside down. But even though she wasn't perfect, he still could have looked at her all day. He thought the color of the dress suited her far better than any of the other girls, although he knew he shouldn't tell anyone this.

The organist played yet another fanfare when Ginny finally joined the other bridesmaids, and then Alicia appeared in the doorway, on her father's arm. He was wearing very stiff-looking white tie and tails. And Alicia —

She looked like a princess, was the only thing Harry could think. His throat felt very tight as the guests all stood and watched her walk toward Roger Davies, the organ blaring deafeningly. *Please*, he prayed silently. *Let it be all right.*

The service didn't seem to last any time at all. At some point, Ruth stood to sing, and then Roger's cousin. In the blink of an eye, it seemed, Alicia and Roger were kissing and the organ was blaring again, and the happy couple was walking up the aisle, while the attendants paired off behind them; Ambrose Davies with his sister Bronwen; Angelina with

George (he knew it was George because he'd started growing a mustache), Katie with Fred, Yarrow with Lee and Cho with Oliver. Suddenly, he realized that not only had Alicia redone the pairings, but — but this left him walking up the aisle with Ginny. He shook as he held out his arm to her and she took it, holding up her dress a little with her right hand as they walked, so she wouldn't step on the hem. He tried to look straight ahead, but it was very difficult *not* to turn and stare at her.

The photographer had them pose for some more photographs with the bride and groom and wedding party outside the church. Three pairs of attendants were placed on each side of Alicia and Roger, and each groomsman was supposed to put his arm around his partner. Since their dresses had halters on top, the girls' backs were all bare from the neck to the waist. Harry put his hand on Ginny's smooth back while the photographer fiddled with his equipment; she looked up at him for a moment, shivering a little.

"Is my hand too cold?" he whispered to her.

She shook her head. "No. No, it's —" she bit her lip. "It's very nice", she said softly, turning to smile for the photographer. "I wish you didn't have to move it *ever*."

Hearing her say that almost made him smile like a complete fool for the photo, but he managed to temper it a bit by the time the flash exploded in his face. After a few more shots, they piled into the cars to go back to the Spinnetts' house. Harry found himself in the same car with Ginny, Yarrow, Lee, Angelina and George. *No ex-girlfriends of mine*, he thought gratefully. Ginny was pressed against him from waist to knee, and he was trying not to think about this.

When they arrived at the house, they found that there were candles lining the drive, although it wasn't dark yet, and an enormous white tent on the lawn between the house and the stableyard with numerous servers bustling about. They were instructed to go into the drawing room and wait. Harry took Ginny's hand as she climbed the steps beside him. *I will take advantage of touching her and being with her as much as I can today. I have a perfectly good excuse, as we're both attendants, so I might as well take advantage of that.* Let Draco Malfoy try to tell him off for just doing his job. Let him try.

The orchestra was still tuning up; Alicia disappeared upstairs to touch up her make-up while the guests arrived. Harry fetched Ginny some punch

and stood in a corner with her, just enjoying being near her.

"Didn't Hermione sound wonderful?" she asked him. "And Ruth?"

He couldn't take his eyes off her. "You look beautiful, Ginny", he said softly. She smiled, turning a little pink.

"You look very dashing, you do. I know you're annoyed, but I think a kilt suits you. It really does."

He grinned. "If you want me to wear a kilt every day for the rest of my life, I will."

She laughed. "I may hold you to that!"

Finally, the orchestra was done tuning up and began playing in earnest. Harry watched nervously as George and Angelina and some other couples began taking to the floor, turning in circles, laughing and enjoying themselves.

"Would you — would you like to dance?" he asked her, uncertain.

"Yes", she said simply, taking the hand he was holding out to her. And then he just knew that there was Ginny in his arms, and music, and Ginny's eyes close to his...

They remained on the floor for three songs, not even stopping between. Then suddenly, Harry felt a hand on his shoulder, and saw Ginny's face drain of color. He turned and found Draco Malfoy, in immaculate formal clothes, his white shirt and tie roughly the same color as Ginny's face at this moment.

"Thanks, Harry, but I think I can take it from here", he said between his teeth. There was a challenge in his voice.

"Ah", Harry said, trying not to squeak. "There you are. About time. Now I can go and dance with some of the girls who are actually available." When he said this, he felt dreadful, but it was necessary for Draco Malfoy's benefit. He nodded at Harry approvingly.

"That's right. Just remember. This one's *not*."

As he took Ginny in his arms, she raised her eyebrows at him. "Oh, that's nice. Talk about me like I'm not here."

But instead of acknowledging this remark, Draco Malfoy simply held her at arm's length, with a lascivious half-smile. "You look smashing", he breathed. She colored, and looked down, as though she didn't want to be pleased about his saying this, especially in front of Harry. Harry cleared his throat.

"I kept telling her that, but you know women. If it's a bridesmaid's dress, they think it's automatically dreadful."

Malfoy laughed. "True. C'mon, then", he said to his girlfriend. "Are you still loopy on painkillers? Can you dance?"

She didn't comment on the painkillers. "I can dance."

Harry walked to the edge of the dance floor, watching them. They actually moved very well together, he had to admit, and were probably the finest-looking couple on the floor, if one was being objective. (Malfoy's lucky he can wear *proper* formal clothes, Harry thought. *With trousers.*)

He sighed. *Watching Ginny with Malfoy for hours on end. This is going to be a very long night*, he thought.

He was relieved when Ron and Hermione arrived.

Ron looked around the transformed drawing room, whistling. "Hey", he said suddenly. "In the car, Hermione and I were talking. Do you suppose they invited Fleur?"

Harry practically choked on his punch. "Er, I sincerely doubt it."

Hermione shrugged. "Oh, you never know..." But she didn't elaborate.

They kept him company for a while, chatting and drinking punch, but finally, Hermione dragged Ron out to the dance floor. Harry laughed at the expression on Ron's face, but that expression changed abruptly when he had his arms around her, holding her to him...

Several women Harry had never seen before boldly asked him to dance. He went along, going through the motions, constantly searching the dance floor for Ginny and Draco, who never seemed to sit down.

Finally, Roger and Alicia entered and had their first dance, and soon after, they were all ordered into the dining tent on the lawn, and ate the most complicated-looking, least filling, and, probably (Harry thought) the most expensive food he'd ever had in his life. He listened with only half an ear to Ambrose Davies' toast to the newlyweds, sipping his champagne, wondering if it would make him drunk. Ginny sat by his side, his dinner partner, and he was startled when, at one point inexplicably eating with her fork in her left hand, she reached under the table and took his left hand in hers, where no one could see their joined hands. Harry's heart turned over and he squeezed her hand reassuringly. She gave him a small smile and went back to eating. We have to appreciate the small things, he thought. And take advantage of even the briefest opportunities.

After the cake was cut and passed round, they returned to the house for more dancing. By this time it was dusk, and a teal blue sky was starting to show a star here and there, while the candles lining the drive flickered like stars that had fallen to earth.

Harry, Ron and Hermione stood together, talking, and Remus Lupin saw them and joined in, sipping his champagne and looking around the dance floor a little wistfully. When they'd been talking for a few minutes, Hermione waved at someone on the dance floor suddenly.

"Maggie! Professor Snape!" she called.

Harry's jaw dropped. Snape was wearing white tie and tails, like the rest of the men, looking dashing enough that many, many women in the room were giving him quite appreciative glances. Maggie walked by his side, as he strode over to them, smiling happily, her ecru gown clinging to her slim body, an asymmetrical hem making it possible for her to walk without being hobbled. Her short curly hair looked very cool, and long silver earrings just touched her shoulders.

Ron goggled at his older sister. "Look at you!" he said in surprise. She laughed, eyes the same blue as Ron's positively sparkling.

"I could say the same thing. And you're supposed to be one of my *little* brothers?" Harry realized, with a slight shock, that Ron and Snape were now the same height.

"Bear in mind that he wasn't even 'little' when he started school", Hermione said with a half-smile, looking up at him with an expression of clear admiration and affection. "And you two!" she said to her professor and his date. "It's so unbelievable that you met years ago and are together again! What are the chances of that?"

Maggie laughed. "How did you find out?"

Ron shuffled his feet. "Well, Ginny told me and Fred and George and Harry, and I told Hermione. Oh, Percy knows, too." He looked thoughtful for a second. "And I think he told Bill and Charlie and Mum and Dad. So that's everyone."

Maggie's eyes opened wide. "Goodness! At first I thought it would be difficult keeping so many family members up-to-date on what was going on in my life, but clearly that's the last thing I need to worry about."

Severus Snape turned to his date. "I forgot to inform you, my dear, that because you told your sister certain — *things* — it is now common knowledge that we first met six years ago." He looked meaningfully at

Harry. Harry suddenly had a better understanding of what Snape had meant when he'd said he wasn't looking for Annie Weasley for his sake; he was clearly doing it for Maggie's sake. His black eyes glittered with amusement, despite the ominous tone. Harry gave him a half smile.

"Oh, Severus, there's little harm in them knowing, is there?"

Hermione shook her head. "I still can't believe what a coincidence it was that you two met that way..."

"Oh", Maggie said calmly, taking a sip of champagne from a flute she nicked from a passing server. "It wasn't a coincidence."

Hermione frowned. Realization dawned on Harry.

"You knew. You knew you were going to meet him. So you asked for sailing lessons..."

She laughed again. "Full marks, Harry. Although I simply knew I was going to meet *someone* important in my life. I had a very, very strong premonition. And I had a dream about sailing on the Firth of Clyde. Mum and Dad were mystified about why I should specifically request sailing lessons *there*, of all places, when there were other possibilities that were closer to home. And when the summer was ending —" her voice became softer. "Even though I was sad that we were going off to our separate lives, I also had a very strong feeling that we would meet again." She seemed mesmerized by him for a moment, before shaking herself and smiling round at them all. "And I was right, wasn't I? I'll tell you the full story another time. Right now, I want to dance some more..." she said, putting down her drink and pulling their acquiescent Potions Master back to the dance floor, while they struggled to pick their jaws up off the floor. Harry turned to Remus Lupin, surprised to find him chuckling.

Then Ron cleared his throat and said, "Er — I need to talk to Remus about something. Why don't you two have a dance?" he said to Harry and Hermione. "You haven't yet."

So Harry and Hermione took to the dance floor, and after that, Alicia was tapping him on the shoulder.

"I haven't danced with all of the groomsmen yet", she informed him. Hermione relinquished him, going to find Ron, and Harry took the bride in his arms and they began to dance.

"Alicia, I — I don't think I've ever seen a more beautiful bride", he told her quietly as they moved around the floor. She shrugged and blushed.

"All brides are beautiful", she said simply.

They danced for a few more minutes before he said, "Alicia —"

"Are you going to apologize for yesterday?"

"Sorry. I mean — no." He smiled. "Now I seem to be apologizing for not apologizing. No, I was going to say — it's a shame."

"What is?"

He held her so that his mouth was close to her ear and he didn't have to speak loudly. "That in years to come you won't remember this day as the day you married the man you love."

She backed up from him slightly, her eyes very large and frightened, but she continued to dance with him, perhaps aware of the fact that everyone was probably watching the bride to a certain extent.

"Harry —"

"Listen, Alicia", he interrupted her. "I know you think you're alone. But you're not. If you ever need someone to talk to —" He swallowed. She looked up, but there was a cloud behind her eyes. "What I mean is, I have some *friends*. Friends who could help you. If you need help. Of any kind. If you — if you ever feel you're having trouble coping on your own. Do you know what I mean?"

She was very quiet. Finally she lifted her eyes to his and said. "Yes, Harry. Thank you."

The music ended and the dancers stood back and clapped politely. Roger strode over to his bride and said, "There you are!" before leading her off somewhere. He didn't seem to notice Harry at all. The fearful look she gave Harry as she walked away with Roger gave him a very bad feeling in the pit of his stomach.

He hovered at the edge of the dance floor for some time, watching people who'd had quite a bit of champagne continue to try to dance. Remus, Ron and Hermione seemed to have disappeared, and he didn't see Snape or Maggie, either. His head was buzzing a little, he had to admit. It wasn't unpleasant; and it tasted a lot better than that watered-down whiskey he'd had in Snape's office...

"She comes on wings of vengeance."

Harry froze. He wasn't sure whether the voice came from his head or from Sandy, concealed under his clothes. When he realized it was Sandy, he turned away from the crowd, so no one would see his lips moving, and said, "Well, that's very poetic of you, Sandy, but what the hell does *that* mean?"

No answer. He sighed. No, she wouldn't tell him, would she?

"All right, then", he said to her. "At least tell me — *what should I do?*"

"*Go outside.*"

"Huh?" He was startled, not really expecting an answer. He looked around, but no one was taking any notice of him. Of course, he thought, that meant someone probably *was* taking notice of him and writing down everything he said or did for yet another Daisy Furuncle article. *I'll just have to take my chances*, he thought, as he strode to the curtained doorway to the entrance hall.

There were at least a dozen people in the entrance hall, standing in groups of twos and threes, chatting and laughing. Harry eyed them warily, wondering again what Sandy's prediction had meant, as he walked to the large arched door, which had been left open for air circulation. He walked through the doorway and stopped at the top of the steps leading down to the drive, hoping to catch a cool night breeze before he decided what to do next. However, the still summer night offered him no respite from the oppressive warmth of the bodies on the dance floor inside the house.

He looked down the gravel drive with its candles, and then he saw her, a lone figure walking toward the house in robes so pale they seemed to shine with their own light. As she came closer and closer, Harry recognized her, and realized that what he thought was a cape was her hair streaming out behind her. She stopped and gazed up at the house, gay with laughter and merriment, music floating on the night air. She didn't seem to notice Harry, but was looking up above him, at the second floor of the house. When Harry looked up too, he saw that Roger and Alicia were on the balcony above the front door, standing very close together.

Just then, Hermione and Ron practically plowed into him. They were out of breath; Ron's eyes had a wild look to them, with that red light Harry was still getting used to.

"Harry!" he whispered fiercely, looking up at the balcony quickly. "I've got something very important to tell you. You — you know, don't you, that I can hear *really* well now, right? Well, I heard Roger and Alicia talking, and you won't believe it! I already told Hermione, and she thinks —"

"Not now", Harry interrupted him, nodding at the figure standing in the drive. Ron turned, his jaw dropping. On his other side, Harry was aware of Hermione stiffening and clutching at his arm.

Harry looked back at the pale figure; she seemed nominally to be a beautiful woman, the same as ever, but there was a fire in her enormous blue eyes that both mesmerized and terrified him. Her sheet of long, silvery blond hair started whipping behind her in an unseen wind. He could hear the orchestra's music behind him still, but suddenly it sounded as though all of the instruments were out of tune, as though every note were somehow being distorted into a misshapen, warped cacophony. Her skin shone like the moon, and when she lifted her hands —

The three of them gasped. It appeared that she was holding a ball of fire in each hand. Her face elongated and her nose and mouth seemed to merge into a long, sharp, cruel beak. The candles that had lined the gravel drive started to shake, and then they rose into the air, floating in frantic circles around her. Harry could feel Hermione shaking as she gripped his arm harder. He glanced at Ron, who looked horrified.

"Harry! Look!" Ron said now. Harry turned again and saw that enormous wings were unfolding from her shoulders; they seemed to have ripped through the fabric of her diaphanous white robes. They weren't angel's wings though; they weren't something from a greeting card or Sunday School book. They were green and scaly, like dragon's wings, shining in the light from the candles and the fire in her hands. As they unfolded, Harry gasped. Her gaze did not waver from the second floor balcony.

"So", Ron said in a strangled voice, "Fleur decided to come." He was clearly attempting to seem lighthearted, but he sounded too terrified for it to be convincing. "We wondered whether she would", he added, his voice going a bit squeaky now. Harry nodded dumbly, looking at the spectacle before them, and keeping a sharp eye on the floating candles, which were starting to whirl even faster.

She lifted her hands with their balls of fire and a sudden wind arose, making the pale robes whip around her legs. Now the ribbons and flowers that had adorned the railings flanking the steps went flying free, swirling around her, some getting caught on her wings momentarily before blowing about again. Ron, Harry and Hermione were all holding onto each other tightly as the gale grew stronger, and they had to screw up their eyes, squinting into the wind. Hermione's hair was blowing in her face, and Harry was thinking that a kilt was *really* the last thing he wanted to be wearing right now. Fleur Delacour continued to stand at the center of the

maelstrom, an electric crackling emanating from her now, her eyes completely blue, no trace of white or black in them as she gazed malevolently at the balcony.

Hermione leaned toward both Ron and Harry so they could hear her. "I think", she cried above the howl of the wind, "that Fleur may have a little bone to pick with Roger!"

Asylum

The wind howled.

Harry shouted in Hermione's ear, hoping she would be able to hear him. "What's going on? She's only one-quarter Veela!"

"What do you mean, Harry? She's not just part Veela. She's a witch! A very powerful witch who's part magical creature. And Veelas are obsessed with vengeance when they believe they've been wronged. Her emotions are augmenting both her magical powers and her Veela powers!" Hermione cried in his ear.

"But — but they managed to subdue the Veelas at the World Cup —"

Hermione shook her head. "I know you love Quidditch, Harry, but it *is* just a game. They were hired to do a job and they did it. This — this isn't a game or a job to Fleur. This is her *life*."

Snape and Maggie appeared behind them with Remus Lupin, all of them shielding their faces from the flying debris and the scouring wind. Percy and Katie staggered outside as well, followed by Lee and Fred. Harry wasn't sure whether Ron had heard what Hermione had said; his best friend turned to Remus and yelled above the wind, "What do you reckon? Between the two of us, could we calm her down?" Harry assumed he intended to use some of the calming techniques Remus had been teaching Ron.

The older werewolf looked at the fierce creature before them. "We need to be very careful", he shouted back at Ron. "Don't antagonize her further." Ron nodded and Harry wasn't sure what they planned to do, but he hoped they would do it soon.

But before any of them knew what was happening, Alicia screamed, ducking, as a ball of flame hurled by Fleur narrowly missed her, hitting instead the curtains hanging just inside the French doors that opened onto the balcony where she and Roger stood. Roger sprayed water at the flaming curtains with his wand, screaming to Alicia to get inside.

"No!" Alicia responded rebelliously. She joined him in putting out the fire, her carefully-arranged blonde hair flying free, grim determination on her face.

"It's you she's after!" Roger bellowed at her. Alicia responded by pointing her wand at Fleur.

It was Roger's turn to scream, "No!" He tackled Alicia and pushed her to the floor of the balcony; they were out of sight now, behind the heavy stone balustrade. Harry couldn't decide whether Roger had been protecting Alicia or Fleur. Hermione was biting her lip, looking up at the balcony. Ron turned to Remus.

"We'd better move quickly!" Ron said.

Remus looked at Fleur, swallowing. "Don't startle her!" he warned Ron. Harry had thought Hermione and Maggie had heard what Ron and Remus had been discussing, but when the two werewolves — or more specifically, Ron — started toward Fleur, Harry and Snape had to restrain them. Percy and Fred looked poised to dive after their brother as well; they wavered, evidently torn between trusting in his abilities and continuing to treat him as their baby brother.

Both Hermione and Maggie were crying, "Ron!" Snape held his date around the waist to restrain her; Harry had his arms around Hermione's torso, pinning her arms to her sides.

He shouted at Snape, "Maggie should get inside. We need someone to distract the Muggles and keep them away from the windows and doors."

Percy's jaw was clenched. "I'll go to the Ministry for help."

"I'll go with you", Katie said unexpectedly. They Disapparated with a double *pop!* Harry saw Ron and Remus moving their lips, speaking to Fleur, their faces pleading, but he couldn't hear any of it. His head was buzzing with the champagne he'd had earlier.

"Where's Dumbledore?" Harry asked Snape. "I thought I saw him somewhere in the back of the church —"

"He had — business to attend to", Snape said clearly above the now-constant howl of the wind. "I know where he is. I'll go." He too Disapparated. Fred and Lee dragged Maggie inside, glancing over their shoulders at Ron, who stood tall and determined, facing Fleur Delacour. Harry heard Fred and Lee close the front door with some effort, because of the wind; he continued to hold Hermione, but he was having a very hard time keeping her in check. His muscles were feeling the strain. He tried to calm her down before she broke free and did something brave but stupid.

"Give them a chance!" he shouted in her ear. "Please!" he begged her now. "You know they're safer than the rest of us. It's harder for her to hurt

them."

She sagged against him, sobbing. He turned her to face him, holding her tightly as she buried her face in his chest; he patted her back and attempted to smooth her wild hair with his other hand. It was very difficult, however, to calm someone else when his own heart was going a mile a minute, and when he could see over her head that Ron and Remus did not seem to be having any luck.

Fleur rose into the air, her enormous wings moving effortlessly. She flung a ball of fire at Remus Lupin, who stepped nimbly to the side, avoiding it. Harry thought he said, "I can do that too! Look." It was hard to tell; Harry had to read his lips. Suddenly, Remus was also holding fire in each hand. Harry remembered him casually conjuring up fire at a moment's notice the first time he met him, on the Hogwarts Express.

But although Remus Lupin's face was not angry and he wasn't hurling the fire at her, she recoiled and pointed at him with the hand that had hurled the fire at Alicia. Suddenly, he was flying backwards at a tremendous speed, disappearing into the night, over the hedges and paddocks, his hands still flaming...

Harry caught his breath and the sound made Hermione turn. Ron faced Fleur alone now. Evidently, he decided that talk wasn't enough, having seen what happened to Remus, and he pulled out his wand. Harry couldn't hear the spell, but a crackling red light was emitted from the wand, only to be deflected by the Veela wings, which evidently *were* a great deal like dragon wings.

Fleur now turned on Ron, who still stood his ground. She pointed, and now, he too was flying backwards over the landscape, the banishing charm quickly making him disappear from sight.

Hermione screamed his name and broke loose from Harry, running in the direction Ron had gone. Harry stood alone on the steps, facing Fleur. He didn't know if Roger and Alicia were still up on the balcony. *I have to get this right*, he thought nervously, remembering the gang of dragon-handlers that had been necessary to subdue the Hungarian Horntail; then there was the conjunctivitis charm which Krum had used on his dragon in the Triwizard Tournament, hitting it where it was most vulnerable: the eye. *At least her entire body doesn't have dragon scales*, he thought. *As long as I miss the wings I should be fine.*

His head throbbed as he cried, "*Stupefy!*" He pointed at her mid-section, trying to keep his hand from shaking, but behind him, someone else had simultaneously called out a warning.

"*Watch out!*"

She moved even as Harry's spell was traveling toward her, the wings again deflecting the spell. Harry swore, turning to see who had shouted the warning.

It was Roger Davies.

"*You!*"

"Get out of here, Potter! This doesn't concern you!"

"I think it does, when she starts attacking my friends!"

"They shouldn't have tried to —"

"What the hell is going on?" Harry demanded of him, interrupting. The magical storm swirled noisily around them. Roger Davies set his jaw and did not reply. Alicia stood behind him, Harry saw now. He didn't know whether they had Apparated down from the balcony, and he didn't care. *This doesn't make any sense.* "She tried to kill your wife!" he screamed at Roger.

"*Harry!*" Someone to his right had called his name, the sound almost disappearing in the storm. He turned to see Ginny and Draco tearing around the corner of the house, fighting against the buffeting wind. Evidently, they hadn't been inside when Fleur had arrived, so they weren't shut up with the rest of the guests. Draco Malfoy was the one who had screamed his name.

"What's going on?" Ginny cried, when they had reached the steps; she looked at Fleur fearfully, shivering. The wind whipped her hair and the skirt of her dress; Harry immediately shrugged off his jacket and wrapped it around Ginny's bare back, thinking that Alicia obviously hadn't reckoned on this happening when she selected halter dresses for her bridesmaids. Draco grimaced, as though he wished he'd thought of giving her his jacket, but he didn't say anything. Ginny slid her arms into the sleeves and then wrapped her arms around her middle while Harry told them what had happened to Ron and Remus. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, without warning, Ginny turned and ran toward Fleur, her hair completely undone now, flying wildly around her head like a russet storm cloud. She pulled her wand from a holster on her leg and pointed it at Fleur, but she

had no time to utter an incantation before a ball of flame was flying toward her.

"No!" Harry cried, running and diving for her. He knocked her to the ground, but the ball of flame hit *him* in the back, instead; she screamed as she fell, the sound filling his brain as the pain from the ball of fire exploded within him. He felt like a hundred Cruciatus Curses were being put on just his back. The pain was mind-numbing, but with an enormous wrench, he focused, and then he was rising up, up and out of his body, away from the pain, and he could look down and see himself, see his shirt burning away, see Ginny's mouth open in a silent, horrified scream. His body was atop hers still, shielding her.

Harry could see everything with perfect clarity. Draco Malfoy was slowly pulling out his wand and Roger Davies was dragging on his arm and shouting at him soundlessly, all in slow motion. As if moving underwater, Draco pulled his fist back, then moved it forward again, excruciatingly slowly, his knuckles finally smashing into Roger Davies' jaw. Inch by inch, Roger flew backwards, colliding with Alicia, who was knocked down very gradually, her new husband on top of her, holding his jaw and glaring at his attacker.

Harry saw that his shirt was in burnt tatters and that his back was covered in ugly burns. There were no longer flames on his back, though, and his kilt was intact. Still, Ginny knelt by his side, tears streaming down her face, so slowly, so slowly, that he could see each one. It all seemed to be happening so slowly...

He saw Draco Malfoy's face then, saw the raw fury as he pointed his wand at Fleur, his eyes grey as steel and yet afire. Fleur's hand held another ball of fire, and she was once more aiming at Harry. *If she hits me again...* Harry wondered how long it would take for him to die...

As the fire left her hand, Draco Malfoy blasted it out of the air, and corkscrew tongues of fire came showering down from the sky, very small and relatively harmless now. Malfoy had prevented the fire from reaching Harry.

Draco's lips were moving, and at first Harry thought he was saying *his* name again, but then he realized that it was *that curse*. Roger Davies was slowly getting to his feet, but he disarmed Draco Malfoy too late; the spell was cast. The blond boy went slowly flying back against a porch pillar as his wand floated toward Roger. However, he only seemed to be winded,

and promptly launched himself at the groom, and the two of them tumbled languidly down the steps, locked together, even as Draco's spell was having its effect on Fleur. Harry looked down on the shriveled skin that was his own back, thinking, *No, Draco. Not that... not that curse...* "

For Draco Malfoy's aim had been true. Fleur convulsed when the curse hit her, and, in mid-air, she changed to her human appearance again. Roger and Draco could not see it, as they were rolling over and over on the ground. But Harry could see it; like film being run slowly backwards, her face metamorphosed back into the woman he had first seen three years earlier, her wings folded and diminished until they were completely gone, and then he saw her fall, fall, fall...

She seemed to lie there forever, and Harry feared the worst, but then she lifted her head, her eyes still utterly blue, and as she knelt, Harry had a horrible premonition of what she was going to do. He remembered what this was like, the sensation of being appalled by his own actions, even as he was unable to stop himself...

She knelt and, with a slow grace, raised her small, white hands, positioned to hold an invisible knife-handle; she brought her hands down, as though the blade on her unseen knife had sliced into her abdomen; she moved her hands across her body, performing a perfect pantomime of the grisly ritual, her face dripping with perspiration, and every movement slow, so agonizingly slow and drawn-out — although Harry knew that for her, it was happening impossibly quickly. She put down the imaginary blade and continued the pantomime, pretending to remove her own insides, to disembowel herself, continuing the morbid play...

Then she started screaming. She opened her mouth wide, her eyes horrified; she hardly seemed to have a moment for breathing. Harry was not sorry he could not hear her. She looked to be in more pain than anyone Harry had ever seen, her face reddening as the screaming went on, and on, and on... Finally, she stopped and collapsed on the ground, and Harry remembered that Karkaroff had blacked out when Draco Malfoy had put the same curse on him.

Roger Davies and Draco Malfoy were still locked in their slow-motion combat, occasionally landing blows on each other, no wands in sight, while Alicia stood nearby, pointing *her* wand at the pair of them, but casting no spell. Gradually, Harry saw Roger escape from Draco's grasp, and, as though moving underwater, run to Fleur. He held her limp body in

his arms, while Alicia lowered her wand and stared at him, her husband, crying over his former girlfriend. Her face was inscrutable.

And then all at once, there were people: Snape, and Dumbledore, and Percy and Katie and some Aurors he didn't recognize all suddenly appeared. A wizarding ambulance *popped!* into existence on the Spinnet's lawn; it seemed sudden even to Harry, so he knew it was in the blink of an eye for the others. Ron and Remus and Hermione came running around the corner of the house and headed straight for him and Ginny. People were suddenly everywhere; milling in groups; talking to Draco Malfoy, who was waving his arms wildly; hovering over Fleur, who was still in Roger's arms; looking at the burnt skin on his back, trying to revive him. He looked down at the chaotic scene dispassionately, thinking about what to do next.

Go back.

It was a very logical-sounding voice, like the voice at the back of his head that had questioned why he should jump on the desk, the first time the Imperius Curse had been placed on him.

No, he thought at the voice. It will hurt.

Life is pain. You know this. You can't refuse to go back much longer.

Why?

If you wait too long, you won't be able to go back...

Not go back.

In some ways, it was tempting, so very tempting... He felt light and free and utterly without pain, emotional or physical. He could never feel pain again, could he? Or have his heart broken...

He looked down at Ginny, crying and shouting at him to wake, he assumed. *Not true*, he thought. *I can still feel enough to not want to hurt her that way, to not want to abandon her...*

He made himself sink down again into his body, knowing that the pain that would greet him would be astronomical, knowing that it might be too much to bear. *I've borne the pain of Cruciatus*, he reminded himself. *I've received the Dark Mark*. He wasn't ready yet to give up, ready to say that he was too tired to continue, to shoulder on. He still had so much to do...

The second his mind and body and soul were one again, the messages being sent to his brain from the nerve-endings in his back caused him to howl in pain so loudly that it made his throat raw, but he could see, even in

the midst of his pain, that Ginny was smiling and laughing hysterically through her tears.

"*He's alive!*" she screamed to whomever was nearby, clearly having doubted it. The ambulance workers pushed her away, as well as Ron, Hermione and Remus. He saw Draco Malfoy take Ginny in his arms, while she sobbed on him uncontrollably, still wearing Harry's jacket, and the pain continued to push on Harry's brain relentlessly, regardless of the ministrations of the mediwizards; the burns turned every neuron he had into a pain receptor, lighting up his entire mind with more agony than he'd ever experienced. He looked up at Ginny and Draco again, gasping when he saw that Draco Malfoy had transformed into an enormous black dragon, breathing fire at Ginny... she would be engulfed in flames... But a second before the flames reached her, he blinked, and saw that they were both human again, holding each other desperately, and that reasonable voice in the back of his mind said, *You're just hallucinating from the pain.*

Right, he said to the voice. *So make it stop.*

His mind was too overwhelmed, and he couldn't withstand the temptation to escape again, through more conventional means this time...

Everything went black.

* * *

Harry thought that he had perhaps made a mistake; maybe he *had* died. Was this heaven? he thought. It looked like no other place he'd ever been.

He had awoken to find himself lying on his stomach in a huge bed with an elaborately-carved headboard and heavy-looking brocade hangings. Raising himself slightly and looking around the room, he saw lush Persian carpets, gilded cornices and picture frames, brocade-upholstered sofas and chairs around the walls, a crystal chandelier and huge French doors which seemed to open onto a balcony; it all came into focus when he put on his glasses, which someone had considerately left on a marble-topped table next to the bed.

It was an overcast day, but candles in sconces all around the room cast a warm glow on everything. He'd never been in such a rich-looking room in his life. Since the illumination was candles, not electric lights, he assumed that he was in a wizarding house. The artwork was all still-lives and landscapes, so there were no moving people, but when he squinted at a painting above the mantel, opposite the bed, he saw that a light breeze was blowing the marsh grasses depicted therein, and that the clouds in the

painted sky were drifting ever so subtly across the expanse of blue. Now *this*, he thought, *is my idea of a room in a castle*. He actually liked the homespun simplicity of Ascog Castle, but this room definitely seemed to be more deserving of the "castle" moniker. It might even be a room in a palace, he realized.

He tried to turn over onto his back, and immediately discovered why he'd been sleeping on his stomach; the pain made him sit bolt upright, sweating profusely. *Mental note*, he thought; *don't do that again*.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and landed on a soft carpet, his toes sinking into its luxurious depths. In a far corner of the huge room was an oversized mirror, as big as the Mirror of Erised; Harry walked to it, his knees shaking. He saw immediately that it was an ordinary mirror and that he was the same as ever, for the most part. His chest was bare and he wore striped silk pajama trousers which were a couple of inches too short. He ran his fingers through his hair and over the stubble on his cheeks and chin; there would be time for grooming later.

"If you need a shave, the en suite bath is on the other side of the room", the mirror informed him helpfully. He blinked, having forgotten that wizarding mirrors spoke, after spending a week back in the Muggle world. *How soon we forget*. He turned and saw an open door on the far side of the room; the limited view he had of the fixtures within made him think it was probably on a par with the prefects' bath at Hogwarts. All he could see was beige marble.

"Thanks", he said to the mirror. "Maybe later."

Then he turned and looked over his shoulder at the reflection of his back; there was one enormous piece of cloth somehow adhered to the skin. He assumed that there was some kind of poultice under it, but while the poultice may have been generating new skin for him, it was certainly doing nothing for his pain. He turned again to face his reflection, wondering, *Where am I?*

Harry touched his scar tentatively; it hadn't hurt since the day Diagon Alley had been attacked and he'd gone down in the pool at Ascog. He'd seen in the news that there had been some scattered Death Eater activity, but nothing in which Voldemort himself had been directly involved. He moved his hand down to reflexively to finger the basilisk amulet hanging around his neck, feeling a warmth and calmness seep into him as he did so. He closed his eyes and saw Ginny in the kitchen at the Burrow, kissing her

mother on the cheek and then stepping toward the fireplace. Ron stepped into view then; from the mantel, he took down the flower pot where they kept the Floo powder and held it out to his sister...

Wait a minute, he thought, releasing the amulet, then taking it off and holding it by the chain, staring at the silver metal. *This was in my pocket. Who put it around my neck?* he wondered. In the chaos that followed Ginny's riding accident, and then the wedding and Fleur, he hadn't given it back to her. He'd continued to carry it around, not trusting himself to wear it, waiting for a good opportunity to give it to her. (He'd probably had several opportunities after returning to the Spinnet house from the church, he realized, before Draco Malfoy had arrived, but he'd been intoxicated with her company and had completely forgotten.)

He wandered back to the bed with it, wondering, but just then a tapestry in the corner started moving and a door concealed behind it started creaking open; he dove for the bed, shoving the amulet under his pillow and sitting up in the middle of the mattress (his back not making contact with anything), clasping the blankets around his waist as he waited to see who was entering (without knocking, he thought irritably).

He was surprised; it was two of the doctors he'd seen when he and Hermione had visited the Diagon Alley casualties. He couldn't remember their names. The man had short red hair (he was the one who had been berating his colleague for not reading his monograph). With him was the blonde witch whom Harry had also seen talking to Narcissa Malfoy at the Quidditch match, the Harpies' team physician.

The doctors seemed surprised to see him awake. "Well! You're looking somewhat improved, I see", the wizard said to Harry. "Told you my burn poultice was the way to go", he muttered to his colleague, making notes on a piece of parchment attached to a clipboard. She was carrying an armful of file folders, much as when Harry and Hermione had seen her. Her mouth twisted.

"Yes, yes, you were *right*," she said, as though admitting this left a very poor taste in her mouth. As before, they were both wearing peach-colored robes and matching pointed hats. This time, however, her hair was down from its bun, resting in golden curls on her shoulders. She took spectacles from her pocket and placed them across her nose with its little jog and looked down at the top file she was holding.

"At six-hundred hours he was still running a slight fever and his pulse was sluggish", she announced. Looking up, she eyed him critically. "Looks like that's probably passed. We shall see."

She placed her pile of folders on an ornate gilded chair and withdrew her wand from her robe pocket. Standing next to Harry, she placed her hand on his brow, which startled him; most people didn't walk up to him and just start touching his scar. Perfunctorily, as though it were in the way, she picked up his right hand. Harry looked down at his arm, but then he turned his head and saw that there was nothing on his left arm, and he immediately panicked.

"My snake!"

She put his right hand down. Both doctors looked at him quizzically. "Excuse me?" the red-haired wizard asked, his round face very pale.

"I — I have a snake. She's green, about twenty inches long. I usually wear her wrapped around my left arm. I was wearing her when — when I was burned —" He swallowed. *Sandy had to be all right...*

The witch nodded. "The snake was removed in the ambulance", she said, as though Sandy were a boil or an unsightly mole. "If you wish to have it again —"

"Her! She's — I talk to her. She's not an *it*."

They looked at each other, eyebrows raised. Harry grimaced. *Oh, lovely. Now I'm a raving lunatic to them.*

"You don't understand. I'm a Parselmouth", he explained. "Sandy and I — her name is Sandy — we have conversations. She's not really a pet. She's a friend."

But if he thought that was going to make them more understanding, he was sadly mistaken. "A Parselmouth!" the wizard said, going even paler. The witch looked at Harry very suspiciously. He was glad he didn't tell them that snakes had the Sight.

"Can we get on with it? Your snake is safe. *She* will be returned to you before you leave." She lifted his right hand again and placed the point of her wand under his arm, making him recoil and giggle in what he felt was a very undignified way.

"Sorry", he said, trying not to laugh any more. "That tickles."

She frowned at him and he tried not to flinch this time when she placed the tip of her wand in his armpit. To his surprise, numbers began to appear on the handle.

"I didn't know you could use a wand like a thermometer", he said, trying to be conversational. She withdrew the wand and looked at the numbers as though he hadn't said anything.

"Normal", she announced to the other doctor, who was writing with a long green quill that appeared to have come from a parrot. Then she suddenly looked at him and said, "I think I liked *you* better when you were unconscious."

"Anderssen..." the other doctor said in a warning voice. Harry turned and looked at her again. Seeing her at close range like this, a thought was struggling to swim up from the depths of his confused memories of two lives... *That was it! He knew who she was now!*

"Nita?" he said to her tentatively. She jerked her head up and glared at him suspiciously.

"How do you know my name?" she demanded suddenly. Then he realized he shouldn't have done that.

"Er, I know Draco. Your cousin."

She looked less suspicious now, but no more friendly. "Ah, yes. The one who knows *nothing* about family loyalty."

The other doctor was the one glaring now, but at her, not Harry. "I'll excuse myself now, if you *don't* mind, Anderssen. Don't forget that meeting", he added, tapping his watch and raising his eyebrows. He looked at Harry for a moment as though he was concerned, but it didn't keep him from leaving.

Harry turned to her, bristling. "Draco doesn't know about family loyalty because he helped put his dad away?"

"Why else? And thanks to him, my poor Aunt Cissy is just that — poor. She's been living with me ever since Uncle Lucius went to prison."

"Well, maybe she should ask whoever lives here about making a contribution to the Narcissa Malfoy Rich and Idle Fund", he said, waving his arms at the opulent room. "Obviously no expense was spared in the creation of this place..."

She went red with fury now. "How dare you!"

"What?" he said, truly bewildered. "I appreciate that someone opened his home to me and arranged for doctors from St. Mungo's to come see me and all, but —"

"This is *not* a private home", she said between gritted teeth. He stared.

"Oh. Are we at Hogwarts?" He wondered whether it was some elaborate, seldom-used chamber for state dignitaries. It turned out he wasn't far off the mark.

"No. We are at St. Mungo's."

He frowned at her now. "No, we're not. I've been to St. Mungo's, and this is *definitely* not St. Mungo's."

"Oh *really*?" she answered, crossing her arms, her wand still in hand. She looked over her spectacles at him. "Take a look, if you don't believe me."

He rose slowly and made his way to the door; he was surprised how heavy the tapestry was that he had to push out of the way. When he put his head out of the room, there were the same long, high Gothic corridors he'd passed through when he and Hermione had visited St. Mungo's. He saw the same wimpled nurses and bored-looking orderlies, going about their business. He pulled his head back into his room, looked around and then peered into the corridor again, in case it was some sort of portal, like the doorways at the Ministry of Magic. Finally, he closed the door and returned to his bed.

"I don't understand. Why is this here?"

She waved her hands. "You were brought to the Minister's room. Not my decision, but you know how some people are. *Harry Potter* is in hospital, we *must* take him to the *Minister's room* —" she said in a snide, high-pitched voice.

He frowned. "The Minister's —?"

She rolled her eyes. "The Minister of Magic. Surely you've *heard* of him?"

He stared around at the opulence. "So, when Fudge comes here, this is where he stays?"

"That's right. It's only fitting that —"

"*That's disgusting!*" he exclaimed, wondering if he would have dared do this with the other doctor in the room.

"What are you talking about?" she said impatiently.

"What do you think I'm talking about? This —" he waved his hands, "— this is *obscene*! All those grungy wards and corridors, and that entrance hall that could use a coat of paint, or at least a decent cleaning... How could so much money be squandered on a room for *one person*?"

She drew herself up and looked very proud. "I'll have you know that my uncle paid for this room himself. No money was taken from the operating budget for the hospital."

Harry remembered Cornelius Fudge saying at the Quidditch World Cup that Malfoy had just made a very generous contribution to St. Mungo's. *For this*, he thought, his stomach turning. *No wonder Fudge was always defending him*, he realized, almost wishing that he was back in his other life, where Fudge had never advanced further than being an Inquisitor. Even Barty Crouch, for all that he had the poor judgment to break his son out of jail, would never have approved something like *this*, Harry thought, looking around again, frowning.

"If it weren't for my uncle, I wouldn't be a doctor!" she continued vehemently. "When they didn't want to take me in the training program here, he was the one who convinced the board to accept me, even though I'm not a wizard! And other witches have been accepted since then. I was the first. So don't you sit there, benefiting from my care, and say anything against my uncle! Now lie on your stomach!"

Harry glared at her for a moment, then did as he was told. She began to peel back the bandage on his back; he winced. It was still incredibly painful. To distract himself, he looked around at the room again, feeling far more disgusted with Cornelius Fudge than Lucius Malfoy, if he were to tell the truth. Glancing at her over his shoulder for a second, he then turned and pillowed his head on his arms, remembering the one time he had met Nita Anderssen in his other life...

It was another Malfoy Christmas party. Harry and Draco were in their third year; Jamie in first. They had grown out of playing Paper Chase, and were no longer confined to the nursery during parties (not that they had ever stayed there), but they had been warned not to eavesdrop on adults' conversations. This meant, naturally, that they wanted to eavesdrop on as many adult conversations as possible, and flitted about the party trying to do just that.

They finally decided to station themselves in the entrance hall, concealed behind three suits of armor standing in a niche; from here they could see everyone entering the party. Narcissa Malfoy swept into the hall soon after they had concealed themselves; she was

greeting her brother and his wife and their daughter, who had just arrived for the party.

"Nils!" she said rapturously to an older wizard whose face was remarkably like hers, his grey and blond hair blending into silver. She seemed like she was going to kiss him on the cheek and then purposefully missed it; the same almost-kiss maneuver was repeated with her willowy sister-in-law, who was also silver-blond. Then she looked at her niece, who was as tall as her, with golden blond hair pulled back into a tight bun and hard blue eyes behind her spectacles. She was wearing long black robes and carrying a heavy book. Narcissa Malfoy, in contrast, had donned sapphire-blue robes with silver threads permeating the fabric, so that she sparkled as she moved. She looked critically at her niece's attire, which contrasted starkly with the festive holiday decorations in the hall.

"Ah, Nita. You, er, brought reading. And you're wearing black. How — festive", she said weakly.

Nita grimaced. "I'm sorry, Aunt Cissy. I didn't have time to work on an outfit like yours. I've been revising constantly. After the new year I'm taking my Matron examinations."

Narcissa Malfoy smiled, something Harry rarely saw, and hugged her niece with what looked like genuine affection. "I know, dear. We're all frightfully proud of you, you know. Youngest Matron at St. Mungo's ever! Before you know it, you'll be in charge of the entire nursing staff!" Nita frowned.

"If I ever am in charge, I am immediately changing the uniform for nurses. I hate wimples", she grumbled. "And even being the youngest Matron ever isn't as good as being a doctor."

"Now, now. Nurses are very important, you know that. And witches don't become doctors; wizards become doctors. You know how proud of you we all are, don't you? I told Lucius that you would be a worthwhile investment. I plan to be quite smug about that for years to come", she added, smiling at the younger woman.

Beside Harry, Jamie yawned, bored. "After they're gone", she whispered to Harry and Draco, "let's go find the twins and have some fun." Harry knew that she meant "fun at the twins' expense", but he didn't mind that, so he nodded.

However, just as Narcissa Malfoy and the Anderssens left the hall, a tall bespectacled wizard with thinning red hair abruptly Apparated into the entrance hall of Malfoy Manor. His robes were plain and black, quite utilitarian, and it was clear that he was not there for the annual Malfoy Christmas Party. In fact, Harry thought, he knew he'd seen the wizard before, but not at the Malfoys' parties. There were Malfoys nearby, though, he seemed to recall...

Then he remembered; it was at the World Cup in Spain, when he was ten years old. The first time he met Ginny Weasley. The tall wizard was Ginny Weasley's father. Remembering how badly that encounter had gone, Harry shrank back behind Draco and Jamie. He wondered whether Ron Weasley and his brothers had told their father that he was stalking Ginny. He swallowed, trying to come up with a plausible way to explain his behavior in a perfectly innocuous manner.

Mr. Weasley had his wand out, but his face actually looked friendly. Hearing the music emanating from the drawing room, he called, "Hullo! Hullo?" He didn't make a move, but seemed to be waiting for someone to come out and speak to him. Draco's mother returned to the entrance hall, clearly keeping an eye out for new arrivals so that she could greet them, as the hostess. She strode purposefully into the grand hall, her hand extended, saying, "Happy Christma —" but stopping, looking dumbly at her newest visitor. "Oh!" she said icily, composing herself. "It's you." When she wanted to be cold no one could be as cold as Narcissa Malfoy.

Harry cringed, waiting for Mr. Weasley to demand to see him; instead, he said, "Hello, Narcissa. Er, Happy Christmas. Sorry to burst in on your party this way, but it is very important that I speak to Lucius."

She put her hand in her robe pocket, and Harry thought it was quite possible that she was reaching for her wand. Not taking her eyes off the red-haired wizard, she called, "Lucius! Please come to the entrance hall!" She continued to glare at Mr. Weasley, icy fire in her eyes, her jaw clenched. In less than ten seconds, Draco's father was striding into the hall, his deep blue moiré robes swirling around him, his features contorted in abject hatred upon seeing his visitor.

"Weasley! What the hell are you doing here? I know my wife couldn't have been so stupid as to invite you! That means you must be crashing my party. Finally figured out that it would be a cold day in hell before you ever received an invitation?"

Arthur Weasley gave him a lopsided smile. "Good to see you too, Lucius. No, I'm not here for the party. I'm here on business. I have a warrant to search the premises." He pulled a piece of parchment from his robes and handed it to Lucius Malfoy. Now that he knew he wasn't the reason for Mr. Weasley's visit, Harry was feeling a little braver, as he peeked out under an arm belonging to one of the suits of armor behind which they were hiding. He could see the official seal of the Ministry of Magic on the parchment. "So", Mr. Weasley was saying now, "if you'll please give us your complete cooperation —"

A moment later, it was evident what he meant by "us;" Harry recognized Frank and Gemma Longbottom, who had suddenly Apparated into the entrance hall with a double pop! They flanked Mr. Weasley. Draco suddenly grasped Harry's arm painfully and whispered in his ear, "Longbottom's parents!"

Harry nodded, not making a sound. He knew all too well who they were. He looked at Jamie, beside him, who glowered at the Longbottoms, perhaps, like him, remembering when they had come to take away Remus Lupin. Harry and Jamie had not told Draco about that; it was too painful.

The Longbottoms' wands were pointing at Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy; Draco's mother was livid.

"Get out!" she screeched now. "Get out of my house!" She had drawn her wand and was holding it with a shaking hand. The Longbottoms stiffened, poised for action. Harry felt like he couldn't breathe.

"Aunt Cissy!" Nita Anderssen said in surprise, returning to the entrance hall, clearly having heard her aunt cry out. "Whatever —?"

But her question was drowned out by the furious argument now being waged by the Malfoys, the Longbottoms and Mr. Weasley. Harry looked at Draco's cousin Nita, surprised to find her looking right back. She edged over to the suits of armor and glanced into the space behind them, grinning.

"So", she said softly. "What are you lot up to?"

Draco hushed her and she nodded conspiratorially, speaking to them now while surveying the scene before them.

"Are those Aurors?" she asked quietly, nodding at the three intruders, who took no more notice of her than the Malfoys did.

"Not all of them", Draco told her in a low voice. "The red-haired prat is Weasley's dad."

"You mean Percy Weasley? Head Boy at Hogwarts?"

"Nah. Well — I mean, Percy Weasley's Head Boy, all right. More's the pity. But I don't mean him. Ron Weasley. In our year. To call him an insufferable git would be to insult insufferable gits everywhere."

She frowned, then looked up at Mr. Weasley; Harry could see her in profile. Extreme loathing was etched on her face.

"Well, I know Weasleys. Wouldn't trust one as far as I could throw it. I hope Uncle Lucius and Aunt Cissy give him what's coming to him for crashing the party." Her voice shook slightly.

"Yeah, we feel the same way about Weasleys", Draco said. "Well, except for Harry's crush on the little sister. He's always haring after her..."

Harry smacked Draco's arm. "Shut up, you!" he hissed. Nita's eyes narrowed as she turned to look at Harry. She seemed about to say something when Harry's elegantly-attired mother and stepfather suddenly appeared in the entrance hall doorway, interrupting the argument between the Malfoys and their uninvited guests.

"Lucius! Narcissa!" Lily Evans said in that clear, ringing voice which never failed to get her Potions students' attention. "What is going on here?" Her long red hair was laced through with gold strands falling from a simple gold circlet, glittering in the candlelight, and her robes were evergreen brocade.

"Lily", her husband said slowly; "don't you think we should let —"

"What I think is that I need to talk some sense into my former colleagues!" Harry's mother said sharply, looking daggers at the Longbottoms.

Lucius Malfoy definitely looked like he didn't want a woman fighting his battles for him. "Now, Lily. This is my house —"

"Please, Lucius." She glared at the Longbottoms. "Consider it my Christmas gift to you and Narcissa and Draco", she said between gritted teeth. Severus Snape hurried forward before the Malfoys could

change their minds (no one had noticed that Nita had joined the younger children in their hiding place). His bottle-green velvet robes bellowing out behind him, he herded the Malfoys out of the entrance hall, looking over his shoulder at his wife, then shooting hateful glances at the Aurors flanking Mr. Weasley.

"So, who's that?" Nita whispered to Draco.

"Our mum", Jamie told her softly. Nita nodded. "Right. You look like her. Except for your hair color."

Jamie's mouth was very thin. "Our dad had dark hair." Her response was almost inaudible. Harry looked at her; her large green eyes were shiny with tears, her usual response to any mention of the father she'd never known.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Lily Evans said to the Longbottoms and Mr. Weasley now. "It is Christmas tomorrow! You know that this is when Lucius and Narcissa have their annual party! And yet you come in here, with your warrant —"

Frank Longbottom lifted his chin. "I don't see why we should show any consideration for You-Know-Who sympathizers."

Harry's mother threw up her hands. "I'm not a sympathizer, you dolt! As if I could be!" She didn't remind him of how her first husband had died, and from the look on his face it was evident that she didn't need to. "But thanks to the way you and too many other Aurors do their jobs, there are a huge number of people who are somewhere in the middle, not sympathizing with Voldemort, but not terrifically sympathetic to the Ministry either. And I wonder why that might be, eh? Raids during Christmas parties, perhaps?" she said to Mr. Weasley, whose ears turned bright red. She turned on the Longbottoms. "Dragging away a werewolf, who also happens to be a man, in the middle of the night from a house where he is a welcome guest? A house where my children, who adore him, were sleeping? Do you know how difficult it was to explain to my two youngest children in the morning what had happened to Remus? He was going to take them to Diagon Alley. They'd been looking forward to it for ages. But you —!" she cried, her fury making it impossible for her to put more of her emotions into words.

She looked back and forth between the three of them, who looked distinctly uncomfortable now. "May I remind you", she said now, the

imminent threat quite clear, "that my husband and I both teach your children?" She looked at Mr. Weasley. "I believe right now that I am teaching five of yours, Arthur. One of whom is hoping to do well on his N.E.W.T.s and two of whom are slated to be taking their O.W.L.s at the end of the summer term." She turned to the Longbottoms. "And you; I'm teaching two of your three sons right now, and the third one is coming to Hogwarts in a year or two, I believe. Do you feel it is wise to antagonize two of your children's professors in such a manner?"

Harry thought it was mostly his mother, not his stepfather, who was antagonized, but the four of them behind the suits of armor didn't dare let even a whisper pass their lips at this point.

"Get out!" Lily Evans said to the three of them now, her voice echoing off the hard limestone of the floor and walls. Arthur Weasley turned to the Aurors and nodded.

"Go. I will talk to Lily for a moment and join you back at the office."

The Longbottoms hesitated, but Mr. Weasley looked at them again with one eyebrow raised, exerting a surprising influence over them by doing this. They Disapparated with a double pop! and Arthur Weasley turned to Harry's mother.

"It's — it's good to see you again, Lily. It's been some time", he said quietly. She looked disturbed by his lack of anger toward her, but nodded all the same.

"I think the last time was when Sam and I came to that village where —"

"Yes", he said, clearing his throat, interrupting her. He looked unspeakably sad. Next to him, Harry heard Nita make a small skeptical noise in her throat. He glanced at her, frowning. She was still glaring at Mr. Weasley. Turning back to look at his mother, he saw that she appeared to be a bit sorry now for the way she'd been speaking to Mr. Weasley, and her face softened.

"How is Bill? I heard he's with the Ministry."

Arthur Weasley nodded. "Yes. Transportation. He complains that it's just a lot of forms to fill out — you know, fining people for Apparating without licenses, sorting them out when they splinch themselves, all that — but I daresay they couldn't function without

him, what with the labor shortage and all." Lily Evans nodded grimly. "You know", he added, "he was — he was quite broken up about — I mean — when James —"

She lifted her head, looking like she was trying to be brave now. "He sent me a lovely letter."

Arthur nodded. "He had only been serving as Head Boy for two months, at the time. All summer he'd said that if he could be half as good a Head Boy as James Potter, he'd be the second-best one Hogwarts had ever had." Harry thought he saw his mother quickly run the back of her hand across her eyes now. It was very fast; afterward she was standing and speaking to Arthur Weasley in a very dignified manner again.

"We always knew Bill would do well. And Charlie. It's a pleasure to have him on the teaching staff. Harry and Draco are really enjoying Care of Magical Creatures with him."

Arthur nodded. "We're just glad he's closer to home. Romania was so far away..." He cleared his throat and looked at her very seriously. "I'm sorry if those of us who work for the Ministry sometimes come across as martinets, Lily. I wish you could see Lucius Malfoy the way I do —"

Harry knew that she did. She opened her mouth as if to say this, then shut it again quickly and swallowed; perhaps she didn't think it wise to say this in Lucius Malfoy's own house. "I just think — I think the Ministry should spare a little concern for its public image. One must consider how something like this looks, Arthur. A raid on Christmas Eve, during a large party? It's not going to make most people very avid supporters of the Ministry, is it? I mean — Draco is here. And Narcissa's niece. And my four children. And the Parkinsons' daughter, and the Notts... Do you think we want our children seeing this? Seeing the way we adults cannot get along, the way we try to blindside one another and sneak around and —" She seemed to be having trouble breathing suddenly, putting her hand on her chest; Harry clearly saw the tears running down her face.

Arthur Weasley stepped forward, concerned. "Are you all right, Lily? You seem a bit — stressed."

She looked at him, eyes glistening. "You have no idea." She sighed deeply. "Please, Arthur. Come back the day after tomorrow..."

He patted her hand. "Of course. You're right, you're right. I shouldn't have listened to Frank. 'Surprise him', he said. 'I can't wait to see the look on his face', he said." Mr. Weasley grimaced. "Well, I for one could have waited."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "And now you shall. But Arthur —"

"What?"

"I — I didn't mean to threaten your children. Before. It's just — ever since I married Severus, Frank and Gemma have been so impossible —"

He smiled at her. "You know how they are about Slytherins. And I'm not saying they're my favorite people. As it is, what with Neville and Ron being best mates, we see them far more than we'd like to." Lily looked sadly at him.

"My condolences", she said, before breaking into a smile. He still smiled back at her.

"Ah, well. You know how it is. We put a good face on it for the children's sake."

She nodded. "Then you know." She let him think about that for a moment, before understanding dawned on his face. He knew now how she felt about the Malfoys.

"Ah, ah, I see, I see. Yes. Of course."

She put her hand on his arm and said gently. "Happy Christmas, Arthur. And to Molly as well. And say hello to Bill for me."

"Happy Christmas, Lily", he said with a small smile, before Disapparating.

Harry rested his right cheek on his forearm, trying to remember why that was the only Christmas party where he remembered seeing Nita. He had a vague recollection of Draco's Uncle Nils saying in earlier years that she was at home alone again, revising, and in later years that she had volunteered to work during the holidays. As it was, even though her parents had dragged her to the party he'd just remembered, she had taken a book with her. (Although she *had* let herself be distracted from her revision by the goings-on in the entrance hall.)

Harry thought about what he remembered; she'd been interested in magical medicine in his other life, also, but in that life she didn't have the opportunity to study to be a doctor, only a nurse. Was that because Voldemort had never fallen? he wondered.

He flinched as she worked. "Can't you just — you know, do a spell or a charm or something to fix the problem?" he said between gritted teeth.

"Hmph! Don't get me started. Clancy is my senior", she said bitterly, continuing to work. "He has set out your treatment. I'm to follow his orders."

As she worked on his back, he had an evil thought. "I didn't know doctors did nurses' work", he said. He turned his head slightly; her eyes were furious now. He had succeeded in winding her up. He didn't look down on nurses; he liked Madam Pomfrey very much. But he knew what *her* opinion was.

"This is *not* nurses' work. I wouldn't trust any of *them* with this." He winced again, wondering whether she wouldn't trust them to cause him enough pain.

"If Voldemort hadn't fallen, *you'd* probably be a lowly nurse, you know", he dared to say. She stiffened, then continued to work, covering up his back with the bandage again.

"My uncle would have —"

"Your uncle would have killed even more people, given the chance!" he said angrily, rolling over and sitting up, glad she was done. How could she continue to defend him? Even Draco Malfoy didn't do that.

"He didn't kill *anyone*", she said, crossing her arms, still holding her wand.

"No, he didn't get his hands dirty himself. But he *did* order the Clearwater family killed. That's *his* fault."

She was silent, staring at a point over his head. Finally, she met his eyes again. "Fine. I'll give you that. It was wrong. But sending him to prison should have been adequate punishment. There was no reason to make my aunt destitute. She deserves that money far more than —"

"Percy Weasley? I don't know about that. Oh, I don't doubt he'd rather have his fiancée back, rather than the money, but I think it was perfectly reasonable to take the money and give it to him, seeing as your uncle took away his future wife and — well, his future. In that your precious Aunt

Cissy never lifted a finger to get him to stop what he was doing or tried to turn him in, I don't see why she deserves to be living in the lap of luxury."

"Turn him in!" she cried. "Like her no-good son! I'll have you know that *she* has more loyalty than that! I doubt you would ever understand", she added bitterly.

He glared. "I'm loyal to those who deserve it. Loyalty once saved my life, and the lives of three other people." He remembered how glad he had been to see Fawkes flying overhead in the Chamber of Secrets, and to hear the phoenix song...

"Then how do you explain being loyal to the *Weasleys*?" she asked bitterly, as though this was a contradiction. Harry wondered whether Draco had ever told her about that first time on the Hogwarts Express, when he'd extended his hand to Harry, only to be rejected. "They're practically your adopted family, I understand. No wonder you're defending Percy Weasley getting my aunt's money. If you only knew what the Weasleys really are —"

"What?" he demanded. "*What* are they, really?" he challenged her. *Draco Malfoy and his father must have fed her anti-Weasley propaganda for years before Draco started seeing Ginny*, he thought.

Her face had reddened. She didn't answer, but turned on her heel and stalked to the door. When she opened it, she stopped in surprise; four people stood there, about to enter. Ron and Hermione stood looking at her awkwardly, Ginny and Draco Malfoy standing next to them. Malfoy looked very surprised to see his cousin.

"Nita!" he cried.

She glared at him, and then at Ron and Ginny, before pushing past them. They all turned and looked after her for a moment, then gave a collective shrug and entered the room. They quickly forgot about her when they saw the opulent room, their jaws dropping. Oddly enough, instead of questioning the appropriateness of the room, Hermione was the first to recover.

"Harry!" Hermione cried, launching herself at him and throwing her arms around his back to hug him. Harry never knew where the agonized cry he uttered came from; it didn't seem to be from his throat. She pulled back, looking stricken.

"I'm — I'm sorry, Hermione", he said, when the power of speech had returned to him; "but — this really isn't a good time for anyone to be

touching my back..."

"Why's that?" Ron said grinning, pulling his hand back as if to slap Harry hard on the back. He stopped his hand a few inches away, as Harry gave him an evil look. Ron laughed. "You know I wasn't going to —"

"Yeah, because I knew you wanted to go on living", he responded, forcing himself to laugh too.

"Ron!" Hermione chastised him. "It's not funny!"

Harry looked at Ginny and Draco. "Hello", he said quietly to them. Ginny swallowed and looked at him, her eyes very wide; he could see she was trembling. Draco Malfoy looked a bit uncomfortable. Harry nodded at him.

"Draco." He forced himself to use the first name. He remembered the fury in his face when he had blasted the fireball out of the air, the fireball which could have killed him; and then cursing Fleur...

"Harry", Draco responded after a moment; Harry thought it was possible Ginny had nudged him with her elbow to get him to speak.

"Thanks", Harry said to him now. Draco Malfoy frowned at him.

"For what?"

"Well, um, you saved my life."

Draco paused. "I guess that makes us even." Then he narrowed his eyes. "Wait — how do you know? Who told you?"

Harry shrugged. "I saw you."

"You did?"

He looked at Ginny now. "The reason why it seemed so hard for people to revive me was that I wasn't really there. Not completely. I used the pain-blocking technique, where I'm sort of floating above my own body, able to see everything going on around me..."

Understanding flooded Draco Malfoy's face now. "Oh", he said, drawing it out. Ginny's mouth opened and closed several times before she spoke.

"That's why you — you —"

"Sorry", he said softly to her. "I rather got the impression that you — you thought I was dead. I didn't mean to frighten — anyone." He'd been about to say "frighten *you*" and changed it at the last moment.

She whispered, "I'm just glad you're all right."

Draco Malfoy put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her tight against him, kissing her brow. She looked at him sadly, and Harry

wondered how she was feeling about him now; she seemed very solicitous, and frankly, he didn't blame her. Draco Malfoy appeared to be very emotionally fragile suddenly. He turned to Harry again, his voice cracking. "I need to say thanks, too, Harry."

"For what?"

"For saving Ginny", he said, looking down into her eyes again. Now Harry understood; it wasn't that Draco Malfoy was suddenly in the business of being nice to Harry Potter, or even paying Harry back for saving him from the giant spiders in the Forbidden Forest. He had kept Fleur from hurling the ball of fire at him because he had saved Ginny from the same fate.

"How — how is Fleur?" Harry asked now, to change the subject. His four visitors all looked at each other uncertainly; Draco Malfoy looked particularly uncomfortable. Hermione finally illuminated him.

"Oh, Harry — she's very bad. She's in a room upstairs in the mental ward — a padded cell, really. Just sitting in the corner, rocking. The — the pain from the Hara Kiri curse — it was too much for her —" She glanced nervously at Draco Malfoy, then away.

Harry frowned. "So — just having the curse on her the one time — it had the same effect as Cruciatus being put on the Longbottoms for a long time? You're sure she's not just in shock? Maybe she'll come out of it."

"That would be nice, but so far the damage appears to be permanent", she said quietly. "You see — well, first I think Malfoy was very keyed up when he cast the spell. And then there's —"

"— there's the Obedience Charm —" Harry said for her.

She nodded. "Increasing his power. And added to that —" She bit her lip and looked down; she seemed a bit green. He waited for her, but finally he couldn't wait any longer.

"What?"

Ginny finally spoke. "Fleur is pregnant."

Harry's jaw dropped. "*What?*"

Malfoy finally spoke, very mechanical, as though he was trying to keep his voice devoid of emotion. "When I had that curse put on me by my dad, he wasn't doing it in a life-and-death situation. He wasn't all worked up. It wasn't as strong. And even when I — when I used that spell myself, other times, I wasn't so — so —" His self-control collapsed, and he looked worse than Harry had ever seen him in this life, almost as bad as when the

Draco Malfoy in his other life was mourning Jamie Potter. Understanding dawned on Harry.

"Right", he said softly. "And while *you* were imagining that you were disemboweling yourself, which is horrible enough, you *weren't* imagining that you were cutting yourself open and removing your own child from the womb —" He swallowed hard. "No wonder it overwhelmed her", he whispered.

"And no wonder she showed up at the Spinnetts' like that", Hermione said softly, swallowing, looking like she didn't want to think about what Fleur had imagined when Draco had cursed her. "It also provides another explanation for why she was so powerful. When a witch is expecting a baby — it augments her magic for a while. The power grows at first, then dwindles as the delivery date approaches. Fleur is about twenty weeks along, the doctors said. That's about half-way, so she was at her strongest. That helped her a bit. The doctors say that physically, she's fine and the baby is fine. Well — I should say, from the neck down, she's fine —"

"But her mind —?" Harry prompted her. Hermione shook her head. "She's gone. She's said a word here and there in French, but even that doesn't make any sense. No one can reach her. It was — it was just too much for her to bear."

Harry saw that Draco had dark circles under his eyes; he'd never seen him so adversely affected by something he'd done. Usually he erected a façade of being utterly pleased with himself, no matter what he did, no matter the result. He wasn't even bothering with that now. The self-loathing was emanating from him like heat, and Harry found himself unable to say anything critical.

"Draco didn't know she was pregnant", he said to Hermione. "He — he meant well."

The blond boy brought his head up abruptly, looking suspiciously at Harry for some sign of sarcasm, but found none. "That doesn't change what I did", he said quietly, surprising Harry.

"No", he agreed. "That's true." He couldn't argue with that. Then he thought about what Hermione had said about Fleur's pregnancy. "Hermione — twenty weeks ago would have been — mid-April, roughly. That was — that was *after* I saw Roger and Alicia at the Hogsmeade school."

Ron frowned. "What?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "He was sneaking around with Alicia in March. Possibly before that, but I saw them in March. Fleur didn't get pregnant until mid-April. He must have been seeing both of them at once. And then we all received wedding invitations at the end of July, when Fleur was about sixteen weeks along. At that point, you'd think it would be Roger and *Fleur* announcing their wedding, not Roger and Alicia, right? I mean, if he was seeing two girls and had to choose one to marry at that point, you'd think it would be the one carrying his child."

He remembered the way Roger Davies had been behaving when Fleur was attacking. *He'd been protecting her*. He must have known she was pregnant. And he'd told Alicia that it was *her* Fleur was after. Hermione had been wrong; Fleur didn't have a bone to pick with *Roger*. She wanted *Alicia* out of the way...

He looked up at them all. "I thought Alicia was marrying Roger because he was threatening her in some way, or perhaps threatening her family. I'm not so sure about that now —"

Ginny frowned. "You don't think Alicia's threatening *Roger*, do you? And that's why he couldn't be with Fleur —?"

He shook his head. "No. I still think *someone's* threatening Alicia or her family, and that's why she married Roger. But I don't think Roger's the one doing the threatening, see. He still seems to care a lot about Fleur. I think he may even have known she was carrying his child. I believe that the same person who's threatening Alicia is also threatening Roger." The four of them looked at him in amazement. "I think that someone is manipulating both Alicia and Roger, and Fleur was caught in the middle. For some reason, someone wants Roger and Alicia to be married, and they don't care what Roger and Alicia want. The question is — who?"

"And *why*?" Ron said ominously. Then he opened his eyes wide and hit his head. "Oh! I almost forgot! What I heard Roger and Alicia talking about!"

Harry had forgotten about that too. "What did you hear?" he said anxiously.

Ron looked grim. "This may explain a bit. Roger and Alicia — well, they're going to be working to get her father elected to Parliament."

Harry looked at him blankly. "Yeah, I know. She told me already. *That's* what you had to tell me?"

Hermione swatted Ron with the back of her hand. "*That* wasn't the important part, Ron. Don't you remember what else you told me? About the whip?"

Ron frowned. "Yeah, but that's the part I didn't understand. They said that once they got her father elected, all they'd need to do was get the whip out of the way, and her dad would have a clear path. And you got all excited about that. But — I don't get it. What's so big about getting a *whip* out of the way?"

She rolled her eyes. "I didn't realize you didn't know what they were really *saying*, Ron. The whip is a *person*. Or rather, two people. There's a majority whip and a minority whip. The whip is the person in the party who gets all of the other people in the party to vote the same way. Or tries to. The whip is a very powerful, important person. Normally, a newly-elected member of Parliament doesn't stand a chance of having any power or influence. But if they're planning to get rid of the people who *already* have the power and influence, that would change. Although I imagine they'd have to get rid of more than just the current whips... there are probably other people who imagine they'd be next in line if a whip position opened up..."

Harry frowned. "Which means even more people could be in danger. So. Someone made Roger leave Fleur and start seeing Alicia, but he didn't obey, strictly speaking. And even though she seemed to be under the influence of a spell or potion at first, perhaps once she found out that the objective was to get her dad elected and into a position of power, she decided not to fight it... So Alicia isn't as innocent as she might seem. Or she really has been threatened, so she doesn't dare tell her father that if he wins, it might be because of something illegal she and Roger have done. If Roger and Alicia are going along with this because they've been threatened, when you think about it, Fleur is the one who's really been wronged..." He didn't add that she'd been further wronged by Draco Malfoy putting the Hara Kiri Curse on her.

They were all silent for a minute. Harry saw that Ginny and Draco seemed very cozy together, and for once, he didn't mind. He could see that Draco Malfoy was torn up inside by what he'd done. *Developing a conscience*, Harry thought. *That I wouldn't have predicted.*

When the awkward silence had stretched for an uncomfortable period of time, Harry quietly said, "Draco, for the past two years people have

been telling me that it's not my fault Cedric died. I'll probably always feel responsible anyway."

His mouth twisted. "Yes, but you're not the one who cursed him. And no matter what I've done in my life, until now, I didn't go about attacking pregnant women." Harry grimaced; this was going to take time. He decided not to push.

"Your cousin Nita's one of my doctors. She says your mum has been staying with her." Draco nodded.

"I know. Just because she disowned me doesn't mean I don't feel the need to know where she is."

"Nita's rather down on *you*, just so you know. And down on Weasleys, as well."

Draco Malfoy shrugged. "What do you think she grew up hearing? My Uncle Nils was in school with your dad, you know", he said, nodding at Ron and Ginny, "and my mum was several years ahead of your oldest brother. And then there's my dad and your dad... No love lost there. There are loads of reasons for her thinking I'm a turncoat", he added, tightening his grip on Ginny.

"When did she start at Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

Draco shook his head. "She didn't go to Hogwarts. Durmstrang." So that's the same in this life, Harry thought. "My aunt's Swedish, works for their Ministry of Magic in Magical Games and Sports. She and Uncle Nils live in Kopparberg most of the year; her biggest job is organizing the annual broom race from Kopparberg to Arjeplog. It's always on New Year's Eve. Father was going to take me in fifth year, as a reward, after —" He swallowed. "After I was initiated. See, the spectators all start out in Kopparberg, then Apparate to Arjeplog to congratulate the survivors. He needed to wait until I knew how to Apparate to take me."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "The *survivors*?"

"The course goes through a dragon reservation", Harry explained to her. "The trophy looks like a Swedish Short-Snout." He remembered that he and Draco, when they were best friends, talked about the day they'd be able to Apparate so they could go to the race. Harry tried not to laugh at the way Hermione shuddered; if there was one thing Hermione liked less than flying, it was probably dragons. He recalled the way she'd scratched up her own face, worrying over him during the first task of the Triwizard

Tournament. And she was definitely glad to see the last of Norbert, the Norwegian Ridgeback.

"So, you speak Swedish?" he said suddenly to Draco, remembering that he'd only pretended to speak Swedish in his other life.

"Nah. My mum does, though. I never did get to see the broom race in fifth year, and I only visited them in Sweden two other times. Usually they came to see us at the holidays. And for years, Nita stayed at Durmstrang during the Christmas and Easter hols. I hardly ever saw her. Mum was big on visiting her brother a lot, though. She was very close to Nita. Treated her like a little sister. They're actually not that far apart in age. Well, they're about as far apart as Mum and Uncle Nils. She's the one who —"

"— got your father to talk people here into taking Nita for doctor's training. I know. She said." Harry thought of pointing out that Lucius Malfoy had also paid for the magnificent room they were in, but he stopped himself. Hermione would launch a tirade far worse than his if she knew about *that*. There was some awkward silence.

"Anyway", Ron said abruptly, bringing a bag out from behind his back. "I brought you a few things." He started taking items out of the bag and laying them on the bed. "*Quidditch Through the Ages*, *Flying with the Cannons*, and your Omnioculars, so you can watch the Cannons/Harpies game again, if you like. Oh, and Hermione thought you might want your N.E.W.T. book", he added, with a sidelong glance at Hermione, to see whether she had detected the humor in his voice. Harry grinned.

"Thanks. But tomorrow's the first. I don't know when they're letting me out of here. I'd hate to miss the feast tomorrow night."

"Oh, before we came in, we saw a Dr. Clancy in the corridor and asked him about you", Hermione said. "He said you won't be able to take the Hogwarts Express, but they'll take you right to Hogwarts tomorrow evening in an ambulance, so you won't miss the feast. You *are* Head Boy, after all. Can't be missing *that*."

Harry grinned at her, then frowned almost immediately. "But what about my other things?"

"Don't worry, Harry", Ron told him. "I went to Ascog for this lot and Sirius is going to bring the rest of your things to Hogwarts for you. He's staying for the feast, he said. He wanted to come with us to see you, and Remus too, but —" He hesitated.

"What?"

"Well, the operatives are very busy, suddenly. I think they're worried about something big happening soon. Snape's in on it too. But he and Sirius both say they'll be at the castle for the feast tomorrow night."

"I hope that's not just optimism talking", Harry said darkly, remembering that Severus Snape had been missing most of the previous year.

Hermione looked grim. "That's what we all hope", she said quietly. Harry found himself looking at Ginny, feeling very guilty about this now, as she stood with Draco Malfoy's arm around her. The boy who had saved his life. She'd been very quiet.

"How are you?" he asked her now. He realized now that he'd pushed her to the ground rather violently just before he was hit by the fireball, and just the day before she'd taken a bad fall from a horse. He'd been very angry with Draco Malfoy about that, and even more so when Draco had claimed to not know why the horse had bolted. Unfortunately, Harry had felt he couldn't reveal that he'd seen him slap Ginny's horse when he'd held the amulet. Plus, at the Spinnets', Ginny had told the doctor that the horse had been spooked for no apparent reason, covering up for Draco. Harry had claimed he just happened on her, so that made all three of them lying about what had occurred. *And, he remembered, I still haven't given her the amulet...*

Ginny gave him a small smile. "I'm fine." She looked sideways at Ron, cautiously, as though he might contradict her. Their visit was cut short, though, when a nurse came into the room with a tray of food for Harry. She told the four that they needed to go and let Harry rest. Hermione leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek, and Ginny followed suit, her lips lingering for just a moment as Harry looked into her eyes, his heart aching. Ron and Draco both nodded at him and then they were gone and Harry was left alone with his food.

He toyed with the mashed potatoes and limp beans with his fork, feeling rather lonely. Pushing the tray away, he fell onto his stomach again, idly leafing through the Cannons book, watching Quidditch players fly about on the pages.

He wasn't sure how long he'd lain there when there was a knock on the heavy door. "Come in", he said, not looking up from his book. He heard the door open and feet walking toward him. He reckoned it was a nurse or an orderly, taking his tray away, but he was completely unprepared for the

hands that clamped themselves onto his head, and the all-too-familiar voice, sounding just as it had in the tent in Surrey.

"*Believe!*" the voice cried.

Harry's head felt like it was going to explode. Then — he saw light behind his eyelids. And there was rain, blessed rain. Suddenly, he was standing in a bright field, naked, and cool, soothing water was cascading over him. He didn't have his glasses on, but he could see everything around him with complete clarity. The rain fell on his face, and he grinned, looking up, holding his arms out, welcoming it. His hair was plastered wetly against his head, he felt the rain rolling in rivulets down his back, and then he felt tongue after tongue of water *moving* on his back, not just down, following gravity, but up, down, sideways, in circles, soothing the skin, renewing it, and he felt the most amazing inner peace and happiness, and knew that everything was going to be all right...

He slowly opened his eyes; he saw the headboard of the bed and his pillow in the flickering candlelight. It was night; he didn't know how long he'd been lying there, how long he'd been imagining standing in the field, in the rain. His breathing was steady and slow. He felt — remarkable. *Rodney Jeffries has healed me.* He didn't know how Jeffries had gotten into St. Mungo's, how he'd even known Harry was there, or what room he was in. He knew security was tight since the Diagon Alley attack. A hospital was meant to be a safe place; a sanctuary. He wasn't sure he felt so safe any more. And yet — it wasn't a Death Eater or someone else with evil intentions who had come into his room. He was certain that Jeffries had healed him. He raised himself on his arms and as the muscles in his back moved, he could tell that the bandage and poultice were no longer on it. Harry looked over his shoulder, expecting to see Rodney Jeffries.

The room was empty. Harry scrambled to his feet and ran to the door, looking frantically up and down the high corridor, then turning and looking at the Minister's room again.

Whoever had healed him was no longer there.

Then he saw that, in his haste, he'd caused a parchment to fall to the floor from the bed. He bent over and picked it up.

Dear Harry,

I hope that you are feeling better and that I was able to be helpful. That is all I have ever wanted. You may have already surmised some of the truth about me. As you may have suspected, I was a Squib, before the Westminster attack. Now I am something else. I hesitate to call myself a wizard, as I am not credentialed. I merely have some magical abilities that I have striven to use for good. Whether I have always succeeded is a matter of some debate, I suppose, but that has always been my goal.

After I saw you in Surrey, I was afraid that Aurors might pursue me and attempt to keep me from helping people, since I assumed that you have powerful protectors following you always. I discovered, of course, that that is not the case, but only after I put memory charms on my staff and discharged them. Their disappearances made headlines, but their reappearances didn't, of course. They are all with their families once more.

By the time you read this I will be gone from St. Mungo's. Having healed you, I know that I cannot refrain from sharing this gift any longer. Since I saw you in Surrey, I've been going mad, not daring to help people who need it. I have decided that I will no longer be frightened of doing what I know is right. I'm afraid I have something of a major difference of opinion with the rest of the wizarding world on this subject. I believe that with great power comes great responsibility. (Yes, I'm quoting someone else. I don't remember who. But I believe he was right.) I don't believe that those with magical ability should shut themselves away for fear that Muggles will demand magical solutions to everything, or in fear that the witch hunts of the Middle Ages will be reborn. I believe it is our obligation to provide these solutions that Muggles do not have. I believe it is woefully irresponsible to keep from the vast majority of mankind information that could help eradicate deadly diseases, hunger, poverty, war. I believe it is irresponsible to see someone suffering and refuse to help because of ideological considerations.

I want to be able to live with myself again. I want to know that my life has purpose and meaning and that I have made a difference and changed people's lives for the better. I could have left without telling you any of this, but I felt you should know. Having helped you, I know that I cannot remain hidden away, keeping my abilities to myself. I

plan to resume the work in which I was engaged before. I know there will be obstacles, both in the wizarding and Muggle worlds, but I will not let those obstacles stop me. From what I know of you since you started Hogwarts, I believe that if you were in my position, you would do the same thing.

I hope your aunt is doing well and that you have a good term.

Regards,

Rodney Jeffries

Stations

Harry Potter strode down Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters with his new robes billowing out behind him, his Head Boy badge pinned to the ebony silk, smiling at the sight of the Hogwarts Express on this crisp, clear September first. The air was redolent of new leather and brass, from the first-years' trunks, but the prevalent scent was of *autumn*, even above the sulfur odor of the train engine, and Harry breathed it all in happily; it was the smell of going home, the smell of returning to Hogwarts.

"We're going back to Hogwarts!" he hissed at Sandy excitedly.

"Yes, Harry Potter. I know. That is the twenty-third time you have told me." She sounded just a bit impatient.

Harry thought for a moment before hissing, "You know, Sandy, I don't know why, but it never occurred to me that you could count."

"Just because I do not have fingers and toes does not mean I cannot count, Harry Potter."

Harry smirked and did not rise to the bait; she seemed a little touchy lately about anti-snake prejudice.

Humming happily, he headed for a clump of people out of which blossomed, like some exotic plant, the tall red head of his best friend, Ron Weasley. He stood outside the group for a moment, waiting for them to notice him, glad that he was going to be able to return to school in the normal way. It was the last time, after all, that he would be getting the Hogwarts Express at eleven o'clock on September first from King's Cross Station, London. He didn't want to miss it.

When Dean Thomas suddenly noticed him, all at once there was an uproar, and Harry couldn't help laughing out loud as his friends fell on him. Ron needed to be told not to hug so hard (he obviously still required some werewolf training regarding that), while Hermione trod on his toes as she jumped up and threw her arms around his neck. Neville grinned ear to ear, standing back shyly, Dean pumped his hand, and Seamus patted him on the back vigorously, then stopped, horrified, as he remembered Harry's burn injury. But Harry told him it was all right, he was completely healed.

"Harry", Ron sputtered in amazement, "what are you *doing* here?"

Harry shrugged, still smiling broadly. "I'm fine. Like new." He noticed Draco Malfoy now, his arm around Ginny as though restraining her, and he said to him, "Must have been that cousin of yours. After she took care of me, I was a new man", he said, grinning, letting him take that as a double-entendre if he liked. Ginny's eyes went wide and he winked at her, feeling puckish.

When he was trying to convince the hospital staff to discharge him from St. Mungo's, he had told Clancy, "That junior of yours, Anderssen, really did the trick. You've taught her well." He had decided not to tell anyone about Rodney Jeffries.

Clancy had been disbelieving until he'd examined Harry himself. He'd taken Nita off a little ways then and started speaking to her in a very irate tone. Harry heard her when she raised her voice and said, "I didn't do a damn thing but what you told me to do. Give me some Veritaserum if you like! I'll tell you the same thing!" Then she turned on her heel and strode off, but not before glaring hatefully at Harry. He wondered whether she'd be in trouble for speaking that way to her senior, but he wasn't sure he cared. Nita was friendly with Narcissa Malfoy, and that was enough for him.

When Clancy was satisfied that Harry really was completely recovered, he'd had an orderly bring Sandy to him, as well as some clothes that Sirius had dropped off, and they'd let him return to Ascog Castle. Since Sirius had already left with his trunk, all he needed to do was retrieve his Head Boy badge (Ron hadn't known he'd put it in a secret compartment of his top desk drawer).

He was able to Floo to Diagon Alley, since he wasn't bringing his trunk, and he'd carried his robes over his arm like an overcoat while he rode the Underground to King's Cross. He had a rucksack over one shoulder with the things Ron had brought to the hospital, so he looked like any other student on the Tube. He'd been positively giddy when he walked through the barrier between platforms nine and ten.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Draco took one of the forward compartments set aside for prefects; Ron hesitated for a moment, as the only one among them who wasn't a prefect, but Harry reminded him that he was Head Boy and Hermione was Head Girl; who was going to argue with them about their best friend being in one of the prefects' compartments?

The first thing Hermione did as the train started moving was put Crookshanks on Ron's lap, where Argent was already curled up, so she could pull out a rolled-up parchment and read it.

"Hey!" Ron yelled as the cats started hissing at each other and batting with their paws. "My lap is already taken. Here, Harry. You take Crookshanks." Ron nudged the large ginger-colored cat off his lap and toward Harry, who was sitting on his other side. Draco Malfoy, who was sitting across from them with Ginny, was clearly horrified. Harry noticed that when Ginny was holding her black cat MacKenzie on her lap — as she was now — her boyfriend sat several inches away from her, pale as a ghost.

Ron thrust his face between Hermione and her parchment. "What's this then? *As Head Girl, you will be responsible for* — blimey, Hermione. Can't this wait until you get to school?"

She started to say, "I'm Head Girl now, and I have to —" but stopped when she saw the pleading expression in his eyes. She sighed and rolled up the parchment again, saying, "Oh, all right..."

Harry was amazed; he had always had a much harder time getting Hermione to relax when she was *his* girlfriend. He smirked at Ron. "If you're not careful, Ron, you'll be corrupting our Head Girl. Next thing you know, she'll be doing her assignments at the last minute... making up her Arithmancy homework..."

"Oh, as if I could!" she burst out indignantly. "It's not the same as Divination. Thank heavens I've seen the last of *that*."

Ginny bristled. "My sister is quite good at all forms of Divination, I'll have you know. And even Professor Snape, who wouldn't give Professor Trelawney the time of day, respects her abilities. *And* Maggie says that Arithmancy is just another form of Divination anyway, and one based on far more superstition than something like Astrology, which is very complex and requires much more in the way of calculations and knowledge of Astronomy. Why, *she* says Arithmancy is hardly better than Bibliomancy." Ginny sounded like she was challenging Hermione.

"What does that girl have against people with the Sight?" Sandy suddenly hissed at Harry from under his clothing. He chose to ignore her; the last thing he needed was to be a translator of Parseltongue in a three-way argument about Divination.

"Oh, *really*?" Hermione said tartly. "Well, Professor Vector says —"

Ron quickly intervened before his girlfriend and his sister could escalate the argument, and soon the Divination/Arithmancy wars were forgotten. After the tension had died out between the girls, Harry thought that it was his most enjoyable ride to Hogwarts in a very long time. They went through several rounds of Exploding Snap, and played with the cats (except for Draco Malfoy), and bought too many sweets and laughed and talked and laughed some more. Harry was glad to see that Draco Malfoy was letting himself be drawn out a bit; he even managed to laugh at his own ailurophobia (as Hermione knew his cat-fear was correctly termed). Harry was more than a little worried about him after his reaction to cursing Fleur Delacour.

It seemed in no time they were pulling into Hogsmeade Station and seeing Hagrid's head rearing up above the crowd of students, as usual. "All right, Harry?" he boomed out, grinning, as he strode toward him.

Harry beamed back at him. "I'm all right, Hagrid. And you?"

To his surprise, Hagrid shrugged. "I'll do, I suppose. Here; the headmaster wanted me ter give yeh this as soon as yeh was off the train." He extended to Harry a rolled-up parchment that looked just like Hermione's, and he assumed it began, *'As Head Boy, you will be responsible for —'* Harry stuffed it into his robes.

"Thanks, Hagrid." Hagrid gave him a very small smile — he seemed rather subdued, to Harry's eyes — and then turned and strode toward the small dock, booming out, "Firs'-years, follow me! All firs'-years! Attention —"

The five of them left the platform and scrambled into a horseless carriage to Hogwarts. Harry watched the castle grow nearer, the windows glowing with light, the most beautiful sight he knew. When they walked into the Great Hall, the myriad candles floating over the tables and the ceiling a perfect image of the starry night sky, Harry truly felt that all was well with the world. He knew there were problems in the wizarding world still (not the least of which was the reason for Roger's and Alicia's wedding), but somehow the unchanging reliability of Hogwarts gave him faith that it would all work out in the end.

The returning students were seated and after a little while the new first-years finally entered, some of them slightly damp (the trip across the lake was sometimes a bit choppy). Hagrid nodded at Harry again without smiling as he made his way to the front table, and Harry watched very

carefully as each first-year was sorted, knowing this was the last time he was going to be seeing this ritual.

One of the first students to be sorted was Gabrielle Delacour. When Harry saw her, his face fell. *Her sister's mind is gone and she's sitting in St. Mungo's, where she'll eventually deliver her child with no understanding of what is happening to her...*

Gabrielle was a good deal taller as a first-year than she was as an eight-year-old. She was one of the tallest, in fact. She advanced on the Sorting Hat, her gait stately as a queen's, and Harry could see that her veela charms were affecting some of the boys, in spite of her youth. He noticed, for instance, that Orion Pierson was standing on his toes to peer over some of the other first years to watch her.

"*Gryffindor!*" the hat decided after it had been on her head for a very brief time. A roar of approval went up from the Gryffindor table and Harry smiled at her as she approached it, remembering how grateful her sister had been for his not wanting anyone under the water to be left behind during the Second Task, regardless of whose hostage was whose. However, unlike many of the first-years who were over the moon about finally being at Hogwarts, Gabrielle looked back at Harry briefly with a flat, dead expression in her blue eyes. She seated herself well away from him, but whether this was intentional or accidental, he could not tell.

When Orion Pierson was finally walking forward to be sorted, he gave Harry a sideways glance, his dark eyes very large, and Harry grinned at him. Orion hadn't been at Ascog the night before; he and his dad had gone to London the previous evening, taking the last ferry to the mainland, and then getting the Knight Bus to the city. (They couldn't get the Knight Bus on the Isle of Bute as it didn't travel across water.) They'd stayed at the Leaky Cauldron overnight before getting a taxi to the station. Harry watched Sirius' nephew approach the Sorting Hat, looking very nervous, but soon after it was on his head, it was crying, "*Gryffindor!*" Orion took it off, a thrilled grin splitting his face, as the Gryffindor table burst into cheers and applause yet again.

Dumbledore stood to speak when the sorting was finished, but before he had even opened his mouth, Harry's jaw dropped. He had finally looked at the front table, *really* looked. He was glad to see Sirius (which meant his trunk had also arrived), as Ron had mentioned the operatives being involved in something important, and he imagined that he was probably

very pleased that his nephew was sorted into Gryffindor. He saw that Snape was present as well, and he had very nearly forgotten about Mrs. Figg being the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. It was so odd to see her dressed in iridescent aquamarine robes and a pointed purple hat, rather than a blue shirtwaist and an ivory cardigan decorated with cat hair. He would have to remember to call her *Professor Figg*.

But the *truly* surprising thing was that *Maggie Dougherty* was sitting with the rest of the staff, wearing robes and a pointed hat for the first time, as far as Harry knew. It was the first time he'd seen her dressed this way, at any rate. She was seated between Snape and — Harry did another take — *Professor Trelawney*, who almost *never* came down from her tower. Trelawney didn't seem very pleased, he thought. In fact, she looked downright *rebellious*.

Dumbledore greeted them all cheerfully and bade them to eat up. The food appeared on the tables soon after that, and when the last crumb from the last pudding had disappeared, the headmaster stood again and smiled benignly at them all.

"Welcome, one and all! I know you are all looking forward to a new term! I need to give out some notices now, but be patient and you will soon all be in your common rooms. I have some exciting developments to tell you about! I am pleased to say that the Ministry of Magic has authorized Hogwarts to give instruction in Apparition to all seventh-year students during the autumn term, the goal being for those students to take their Apparition tests during the Christmas holidays. These lessons will take place in Hogsmeade at the village hall, as it is not possible to Apparate or Disapparate on the school grounds. The Apparition lessons will be taught by Sirius Black." He waved his hand toward Sirius, who half-rose out of his chair, smiling and nodding at the students. Some of them stared openly at him, wide-eyed and horrified. Obviously most of them still remembered him as Sirius-Black-the-escaped-murderer, Harry thought, despite the recent news that he'd been framed. Harry wondered how many students would actually opt to learn Apparition with Sirius for a teacher. He saw that Orion was shrinking down in his seat a little, and then Harry wondered whether the boy would admit to being Sirius Black's nephew.

"During the spring term", Dumbledore went on, "those sixth-years who have had their seventeenth birthdays during October, November and December will begin *their* Apparition lessons, with the goal of their taking

their tests during the Easter holidays. During the summer term, sixth years who have had their seventeenth birthdays before the Easter holidays or right after will have their turn. If you do not pass your test during the Christmas or Easter holidays, you will have the opportunity to keep plugging away until the end of the summer term.

"Any sixth- or seventh-years who do not wish to learn Apparition need not attend the lessons. A student who wishes to cease attending the Apparition lessons may do so at any time. Not everyone finds they have a knack for it. Why, I had an uncle who once splinched himself so spectacularly that ever after, when he blew his nose —" Next to him, Professor McGonagall cleared her throat noisily and raised her eyebrows. He smiled ruefully and continued. "But I digress. Let me stress again that this is *not* mandatory. It is merely an opportunity which I, the Board of Governors, and the Ministry of Magic wished to extend to Hogwarts students who are of-age and who wish to avail themselves of it."

There had been a general buzz of conversation beneath Dumbledore's voice ever since they all understood what he was saying. *Apparition lessons!* Despite the trepidation some people seemed to have about Sirius Black being the teacher, many students seemed nonetheless to be very excited. Hermione's face was shining.

"Isn't that wonderful?" she asked Ron and Harry. "And here I thought I'd have to wait until after I'm out of school..." She stopped abruptly when she saw Ron's expression, and Harry remembered that Ron would not be attending the lessons, as werewolves could not Apparate. She glanced uncertainly at Harry, at a loss; he pulled his mouth into a line and shook his head at her, hoping she wouldn't say any more. Then suddenly, he jumped; Sandy was moving under his clothing. Now she put her face out of his collar, looking around for a few seconds before retreating again.

"What're you up to, then?" he asked her.

"I just wanted to see the world for once, Harry Potter. Is that permitted?" He didn't have a chance to answer her, however, as Dumbledore was speaking again.

"I would also like all of you to welcome Miss Arabella Figg as our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Many of you were taught by Professor Figg's brother, Alastor Moody, two years ago!" he said with a smile. Many of those students, Harry noticed, appeared even more alarmed than when they were informed of Sirius' new role at the school. Harry

wondered whether Dumbledore was soon going to be caught in a storm of owls from parents questioning his faculty appointments.

"I have just one more new teacher to introduce to you all", Professor Dumbledore said, after the mumbling about Professors Figg and Moody had died down. "Joining our esteemed Professor Trelawney in the Divination Tower will be Miss Margaret Dougherty, a fine Seer who will be relieving Professor Trelawney of the third and fourth year students so that she may have more time to work on her nearly-completed book", he picked up a piece of parchment and peered through his half-moon spectacles at it, "*How to Look Death in the Face and Laugh, or Accepting Your Own Grisly Demise with Grace in Twenty-Nine Easy Lessons.*" His blue eyes twinkled behind his spectacles. "I am *certain* we shall all be queuing up to buy Professor Trelawney's new book when it is published."

There was some amused snorting in the hall. Dumbledore continued, "Miss Dougherty *is* a witch, naturally, but, alas, due to circumstances beyond her control, she did not have access to a magical education in her youth. However, she *has* passed N.E.W.T.-level examinations in Astronomy, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, Muggle Studies and Divination with flying colors —" (Ron and Ginny were beaming proudly) "— and is looking forward to joining some of you in your classes in order to be able to attain her full magical credentials eventually. I know that you will be quite respectful of her admirable ambition to finish her magical education, even though you are not accustomed to having an older student present during your classes." He was smiling when he said this, but he also presented a very stern visage, and Harry knew that anyone giving Maggie a hard time would hear about it from Dumbledore himself.

"So, you didn't see *that* coming, eh Sandy?" he hissed softly toward his arm.

Sandy sniffed disdainfully. "Of course I did. That's what I was checking."

"Why didn't you say something, then?"

"I See many things, Harry Potter. Why should I tell you about something that you can see for yourself? With eyes, I mean, rather than with the Sight. She was sitting right there. You couldn't have guessed why?"

Harry was going to ask her what else she wasn't telling him because she assumed he knew, but the notices continued.

"Now, then, on to other issues besides the staff. I am sorry to say that with the exception of the prefects and those seventh-year students who choose to take advantage of the Apparition lessons, no students will be permitted to visit Hogsmeade this term, on the weekend or otherwise. Prefects below seventh-year will only be permitted to go when they are on school business, sent either by me or another professor. It saddens me to make this decision, especially as I am certain the third-year students were looking forward to going..."

"*Too right!*" Jules Quinn said grumpily, and Harry saw Will Flitwick gazing desperately at Jamaica Thomas, who raised her eyebrows and shrugged in a hopeless sort of way. (Dean Thomas, on the other hand, seemed quite pleased.) Had Will been hoping to take Jamaica to Hogsmeade on a date? Harry wondered. It was too bad for the third-years; he remembered how crushed he'd been by the Dursleys not giving him permission to go.

"Well", Harry said feebly to Gillian Lockley, who was sitting across from him; "at least *none* of you can go. It's not just one of you."

He was trying to put a good spin on the situation. This, however, was no help at all, evidently. Gillian actually broke into tears and started crying on Natalie McDonald's shoulder. She wasn't the only one in the Great Hall responding this way; Harry could see and hear the disappointment emanating from the other house tables. Some of the Slytherin third-years were grumbling rather loudly, and one struck the table forcibly. Natalie, who was a fourth year now, had just been able to start going to Hogsmeade the previous year and clearly also felt the loss. She patted Gillian's back and said softly, "As Head Boy, of course, *you'll* be able to go." It was impossible not to hear the slight edge of bitterness in her voice.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Well, erm, only on school business, of course", he said weakly. "And for Apparition lessons."

Natalie continued to pat Gillian's back and say, "There, there", in a comforting sort of way, but she still looked a bit disgruntled herself.

"— and finally", Dumbledore was saying now, ignoring the general grumbling in the hall, "Mr. Filch has made a recommendation which, in light of last term's tragic events, I think is highly prudent. Every evening, all students must be in their houses by nine o'clock. After that hour you may only venture forth accompanied by a prefect and with a note from your head-of-house concerning your reasons for being out and about in the

castle. I do not intend to keep students from visiting the hospital wing when they need to, nor retrieving books from classrooms which were left accidentally and are needed for completing assignments. But you *will* need to have proper clearances to do these things. To prevent students attempting to circumvent this rule, all prefects and teachers will be assigned times to patrol the corridors of the castle in the evenings, and believe me when I say that if you leave your house without the proper permissions, it *will* be known."

Harry felt like Dumbledore's eyes were boring into *his*, and he wondered whether he had his own version of the Marauders' Map. He had never seen Dumbledore look more stern while giving out notices; he was usually rather jovial on the first day of term. No one was laughing now. He went on, very gravely. "Last term a group of students took the teachers prisoner in one of the common rooms." He did not say that it was the Slytherin common room, perhaps to avoid alarming the first-years. "While it eventually came to light that those students were victims themselves of the Imperius Curse, it never should have been possible for someone to curse those students and force them to imprison their professors. Expect", he said now, his voice steely, his face quite uncompromising, "to suffer very dire consequences if you are out-of-bounds this term. One infraction will warrant not one but *three* detentions; after that I will not hesitate to suspend students, even prefects", he said, this time looking at Draco Malfoy, Harry thought. Harry could see Malfoy swallow, and thought of the way he'd recklessly flown off to the Forbidden Forest. "If suspension does not convince a wayward student to mend his or her ways, I shall have just one more avenue open to me."

The Great Hall had never been quieter as everyone digested the meaning of his words. It was very clear what he meant. It was Hermione's worst nightmare:

Expulsion.

Suddenly, Dumbledore clapped his hands and smiled, abruptly cheerful and upbeat. "And as usual, Quidditch trials will begin next week and anyone interested should speak to Madam Hooch. So! Let's all have a good term, shall we?"

The students sang the school song to over two-hundred different tunes, but all rather half-heartedly, as everyone was still reeling from the news about the canceled Hogsmeade weekends and the nightly patrols. (Every

tune being used sounded like a dirge, to Harry, each more depressing than the last.) Harry wondered how much time he and Hermione were going to need to dedicate to patrolling. He was glad they were both done their Animagus training.

Harry and Hermione led the Gryffindor students up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower. Hermione asked Ginny and Lucy Bailey, one of the fifth-year prefects, to take the first- and second-year girls upstairs, while Harry asked Karl Fauth, the other fifth-year prefect, to take first-year boys and Tony Perugia to take the second-years. He and Hermione handled the third years. Before they separated to go up the curving stairs to the girls' and boys' dormitories, Harry whispered to Hermione, "I think our worst risk of out-of-bounds students may be the third years. They were expecting more freedom this year."

She nodded grimly. "I saw Gillian crying on Natalie. Amy Donegal wasn't too pleased, either."

"On the way up here", Harry told her quietly, "I think I already heard Andy Donegal and Jules Quinn plotting something." He sighed. He didn't relish the disciplinarian role in which he found himself. He would have found himself in this position even if he had still been just a prefect, as he would be the senior prefect in the house this year, but it was far worse to be Head Boy. His own behavior had to be beyond reproach. He hadn't counted on what kind of pressure he would be under as a result.

"And then there's Will and Jamaica", she whispered, pursing her lips and glancing at the pair of them, chatting near the fireplace, clearly completely absorbed by each other.

"What? At their age? You don't think —"

"No, Harry, of course not. Not *that*. But — well, some students do start snogging at that age. A little. Nothing more than that, but I still get the impression that Dean would throw a wobbly if anyone laid a lip on his sister. That means they might feel the need to do some sneaking around..."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I've got N.E.W.T.s, Voldemort, the safety of the operatives and a million other things to worry about, and now I've got to stay on top of third-years sneaking around to snog. Brilliant. Just what I need."

Orion Pierson waved to Harry as the first-year boys trooped up the stairs after Karl; he waved feebly back. He noticed Gabrielle Delacour following Lucy and the first-year girls, a listless expression on her face.

He remembered Fleur in her fury, and made a mental note never to anger her little sister. Gabrielle might only be eleven years old, but she was still one-quarter veela, and his memories of what kind of danger that represented were still very vividly etched in his mind.

After the first-years had gone, Ginny and Tony led the second-years off to their dorms. Harry leaned close to Hermione and said, "I think we should also keep an eye on Gabrielle Delacour. Do you think — do you think Dumbledore will let her visit her sister in hospital? Especially after — after the baby's born?"

"I don't know. He was very stern tonight. But Fleur's circumstances are rather extraordinary. *I* think we should make sure Gabrielle doesn't get anywhere near Malfoy."

Harry opened his eyes wide. "I hadn't thought of that. You think she'd try to get revenge for what he did to Fleur?"

She shrugged. "Right now she just seems depressed. I don't see how she's going to get anything done in this state. She'll have no focus to her magic."

"Yeah, well right now I *prefer* veelas with no focus. Much safer, in my opinion."

She laughed and stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "Goodnight, Harry. I'm glad you're well again. Get some rest."

"Here, now, what's this?" Ron said, striding across the room alarmingly quickly from where he'd been discussing Quidditch with Seamus and Neville. (Dean was standing with them, but not participating, choosing instead to glare at Will Flitwick.)

Hermione laughed and put her arms around his waist. "You wait here. I'll be back down to give you a proper goodnight."

A chorus of prurient *ooooohs* went up from the others in the room, making Hermione blush into her hair. Ron's ears turned bright red, but he was also grinning. "Come on, third year girls!" she said impatiently; Ginny and the second years having already disappeared, Hermione led the older girls to the staircase. Jamaica glanced over her shoulder at Will, who gave her a small wave and a smile.

"Can't you put a spell on his bed so it turns into a bed of nails in the middle of the night?" came a harsh whisper in Harry's ear.

He turned suddenly; Dean was standing very close to him, and he shouted in surprise; after he'd calmed down he said angrily, "Don't *do*

that!" Now that he knew it was Dean talking, he had no doubt he'd been asking Harry to put a hex on Will Flitwick's bed. "I am *not* going to hex Will's bed, Dean! Get a grip!" he whispered fiercely.

He was feeling very irked, not having expected one of his friends to try to get him to abuse his authority. "Come on, third-year boys!" he said impatiently, wanting to get to bed himself. He herded them up the stairs and remembered doing the same with them when they were first-years, on their first night at Hogwarts. It seemed a lifetime ago. They were little boys at the time; now they already seemed quite grown up. Will Flitwick was almost as tall as Harry and Andy Donegal had grown a surprising amount, too. He towered over his twin sister Amy now.

Soon they had reached the dormitory. "Well, I won't hang over you all", he told them casually, not wanting to get into another conversation about Hogsmeade visits. "G'night, lads."

There was a half-hearted chorus of 'g'nights', and Harry shut the door, glad he was done with his work for the night. He climbed the steps to the top tower room, which now had a sign on the door reading *Seventh-Years*. He paused to stare at it for a moment. *My last year*. It was such a strange feeling. It seemed like yesterday he was shopping in Diagon Alley for the first time with Hagrid. He traced his fingers idly over the words. Then he heard his dorm mates coming up the stairs and hastily turned the knob and entered the room. He was already in his pajamas when the Seamus, Dean and Neville entered. Harry started to get into bed when he realized Ron still hadn't come up. He lay back in the darkness after the other boys had extinguished the candles, falling asleep before Ron came upstairs, despite his best intentions.

* * *

The next morning, Ron wasn't in bed when Harry awoke, but the bed did look slept-in. Harry dressed for running and went down to the common room to meet the others. Ron was already dressed, stretching on the hearthrug beside Ginny, Tony and Ruth. (Tony and Ruth were now officially a couple.) Hermione came downstairs right after Harry. Annika wasn't coming running, Ginny informed them, but Ruth was. Harry thought Annika might only have been participating to try to interest Ron, who was now spoken-for. Apparently Tony had convinced Ruth to start participating in the morning run. Harry smiled at her; he preferred her company to Annika's, anyway.

They met Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner in the entrance hall, as before, and the eight of them set off for the Quidditch pitch for their morning run. However, just as they reached the pitch, a booming voice rang out, "*Stop right there!*"

Harry whirled in surprise, just as Fang leapt on him with joy. The huge dog knocked him to the ground and began licking his face so enthusiastically that his glasses were completely covered with dog-saliva. Harry laughed and grimaced at the same time, saying, "*Geroff, Fang*", even while he was affectionately scratching the dog behind his ears. Fang's welcome notwithstanding, Harry had to admit to himself that Hagrid's tone had been quite worrying; the last time he had heard Hagrid use that voice was when he'd been throttling Karkaroff for insulting Dumbledore, just before the third task of the tournament. "Hagrid!" he said, trying to smile, although he could see that the half-giant wasn't very happy. He stood and started cleaning his glasses on his shirt while Fang sat next to him, panting happily. "I didn't get to talk to you much last night. How are —"

"You lot are out-of-bounds", he said gruffly, pulling a piece of parchment out of his pocket. He behaved as though he'd never seen Harry, Ron and Hermione in his entire life, let alone any of the others.

"What?" Harry said indignantly. "Since when is the Quidditch pitch out of bounds?" Feeling more irritated now than pleased about Fang's welcome, he wiped his face with his sleeve quickly before replacing his glasses on his nose.

"Well, er", Hagrid waffled, squinting at the parchment now. "Not out-of-bounds as far as location, see", he said uncertainly now, holding the parchment closer still. "More like — time-wise, see..."

"How are we out-of-bounds *time-wise*?" Draco Malfoy said now, a sneer in his voice, as though he doubted Hagrid could actually *tell* time. He'd never liked Hagrid, and clearly nothing had changed about that.

"Er, let me see — *after nine-o'clock, all students must remain in their houses unless they have permission from their head of house to venture forth...* No, that's not it. Er —" he said, moving his eyes further down the page, searching for something and not finding it.

"Hagrid", Hermione said reasonably now. "The headmaster didn't say there was anything wrong with being out at seven o'clock, nor doing exercise on the Quidditch pitch. I doubt that parchment says anything of the sort. *I* received a parchment with all of the new rules and regulations,

and I recall it saying that the patrols were going to take place each night starting at nine o'clock and going until seven in the morning. I read it through twice before going to bed last night." Harry realized now that his parchment — the one Hagrid had given him at the station — was probably the same. He hadn't even glanced at it yet.

Hagrid stared at it some more before admitting, "No, I serpose not, if you say so, Hermione. I just — blimey, I'm so jumpy with all these new rules. I didn' expec' ter see you lot out here and I was surprised — reckoned it couldn't be right for students to be on the pitch two hours b'fore classes... I'm not usually up this early meself, but Fang took on so I reckoned I should check..."

Fang had be anxious to see *him*, Harry knew, grinning at Hagrid. "Well, Ron and Ruth are the only ones who aren't prefects, so don't you think their being accompanied by the Head Boy, Head Girl and four other prefects is certainly adequate to allow them out of Gryffindor House?" Hagrid saw how his eyes were laughing and now he laughed too.

"Yeh got me there, Harry. I'm sorry. I'm not lookin' forward ter doin' them castle patrols, either. Prob'ly be jumpin' at ever' little noise. And Fang'll be worse." He patted the large dog affectionately and Fang lifted his head and whined for a moment.

"Well", Draco Malfoy said, sounding rather impatient. "Can we go running now that it's been determined we're not out-of-bounds?" Hagrid eyed him distastefully.

"I'll be keepin' an eye on *you*, Malfoy", Hagrid said ominously, his voice softer. "I'm not one of'em what believes that Imperius rot. I *remember* being locked up in yer excuse for a common room last term."

"That wasn't me!" Malfoy said indignantly. "I went off to the forest to try to rescue my head-of-house!"

"Aye, and `twas Harry who wound up doin' it. Wound up savin' you, too." The unspoken words hung in the air, the words which questioned the wisdom of Harry doing this. Harry could tell Hagrid was itching to say them, but he was a teacher, besides being Harry's friend, and dared not.

"That's enough, Malfoy", Harry said sharply. "It's time we started running."

Draco Malfoy allowed himself to be led away from Hagrid by Ginny. "I already *said*", he commented, sounding petty. Ginny pursed her lips and met Harry's eyes. She looked very troubled. He hoped he'd get a chance to

talk to her alone soon. He still had her amulet, and there were other issues to deal with as well.

Under Hagrid's watchful gaze (he went up into the Quidditch stands with Fang and seemed to be glaring at Malfoy the entire time) they did their running, then returned to the castle to shower and dress for breakfast. When they were seated at the Gryffindor table, Hermione passed out the timetables to the seventh-years. Harry examined it while spooning eggs into his mouth. The morning promised to be relatively uneventful, with Charms followed by History of Magic. Then he groaned; after lunch they had Double Divination. That would more than make up for the morning.

He was surprised when he arrived at the Charms classroom and discovered that it appeared larger than usual; a wall appeared to have been removed between it and the next room. Hermione, however, did not seem to notice anything out of the ordinary. Another unusual thing was that all of the seventh-year students were present, from all four houses.

"Sit, everyone, sit, sit", Professor Flitwick bade them, grinning happily. There were not quite forty students; desks were arrayed around the edge of the room in two rows, and Professor Flitwick stood on a dais in the centre, while they, predictably, segregated themselves according to house. Harry grimaced when he saw the Slytherins sitting clockwise from the Gryffindors. The Ravenclaws were across from Gryffindor, and the Hufflepuffs across from Slytherin.

"Welcome to Advanced Charms!" Flitwick crowed delightedly. "As you can see, at this level you take classes with all of the other students in your year. This class meets first thing on Tuesday and Thursday, and I expect prefects and those who are members of the Dueling Club to assist me in my instruction, so that we can sometimes break up into smaller groups for practical lessons." His eyes twinkled at Harry especially, as the captain of the Dueling Club.

On this first day, Flitwick restricted himself to lecturing about the charms they would be mastering in preparation for their N.E.W.T.s at the end of the summer term. He spoke from memory, without notes, pacing back and forth on his platform, and over three-dozen students diligently wrote down everything he said, the room silent except for his high-pitched voice and the sound of quills scratching on parchment.

When the bell rang, Harry flexed his hand, feeling like it was going to fall off. He followed Ron and Hermione down the stairs and out into a

courtyard, thankful for the morning break. He collapsed onto the grass, groaning. Ron joined him.

"God, has he been taking lessons from Binns about how to be boring?" Ron whinged, while Hermione ignored the pair of them and pored over her Charms notes, making corrections here and there.

"Don't forget, Ron", Harry reminded him, "we've got the real thing now. Binns, that is. Another hour-and-a-half of writing, writing, writing..."

Ron groaned and closed his eyes. "I'm going to be snoring about ten minutes in, if that."

Harry shrugged. "Well, Binns generally doesn't notice people sleeping. What disturbs *him* is someone actually paying attention", he added, remembering how shocked Binns had been in second year when Hermione had tried to ask him about the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry was, in fact, looking forward to History of Magic, as he felt he could do with a little nap. However, they had no sooner reached the classroom after the end of break, than Filch stopped him and Hermione and told them, sneering the entire time, that the headmaster needed to speak to them. Before following Filch away from the room, he saw that History of Magic was also much fuller than usual, again being populated by the entire complement of seventh-year students. Draco Malfoy's mouth was twisting when he saw that Harry and Hermione were being called away; he looked more than a little jealous that they didn't have to sit through an hour-and-a-half of Binns.

Hermione, on the other hand was very grumpy as they walked in Filch's wake. She was the only person Harry knew who *liked* History of Magic, having read *Hogwarts, A History* numerous times (more times than the authors, Harry suspected).

When they reached the stone gargoyle that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore's office, Filch croaked out, "*Chocolate Frogs*."

The passage slid open and Filch stepped aside, after saying belligerently, "Did'ja both hear what I said?" They nodded mutely. "Good. Remember it. As Head Boy and Girl you'll need it. *But* — don't tell anyone else", he growled, "*if you know what's good for you*."

The hair was standing up on the back of Harry's neck. Hermione had gone pale beneath her tan. They both nodded, still not speaking, before turning away from him. The wall closed behind them and the rising spiral stairs brought them up to Dumbledore's office door quickly. Before they

could knock, they heard the headmaster's voice saying, "Come in, come in, Harry and Hermione."

Harry opened the heavy oak door, smiling as he saw the September sunshine pouring in the windows of the tower room, seeing all of the familiar acoutrements — the model of the solar system, the Sorting Hat, the portraits of former headmasters and headmistresses, dozing peacefully in their frames, and Fawkes, Dumbledore's pet phoenix, dozing on his perch near an open window.

Dumbledore was not alone in the room; Maggie Dougherty already sat in a chair in front of the headmaster's desk, and Severus Snape stood next to her. The headmaster smiled at Harry and Hermione as they entered. Maggie beamed, then spoke as though she could no longer restrain herself.

"Harry! Hermione! I've just been Sorted. I'm a Gryffindor!"

Hermione rushed forward and hugged her. "Oh! That's wonderful!" Then she noticed Snape standing nearby. "I mean — er, well, that is —"

"You are allowed to be glad that someone of Miss Dougherty's calibre is in your house, Miss Granger", he informed her stiffly. "She will not, however, be actually living in Gryffindor House, as she is also on the staff. She will be living in the staff quarters."

Harry raised his eyebrows. He remembered living in the staff quarters himself. That meant Maggie and Snape wouldn't be that far apart. He wondered whether they would continue to have some kind of relationship now that they were both at Hogwarts, since Maggie was going to be studying Potions, among other things, meaning that she had dated her professor. This could get complicated, he realized. He wondered whether Dumbledore had spoken to the Sorting Hat to make sure she would not be in Slytherin House (not that there was probably any danger of that) so that the authority Snape would have over her would only be during Potions classes.

"If you have any problems, you may take them to Harry and Hermione, as the senior prefects in your house", Dumbledore told Maggie now, "or to your head-of-house, Professor McGonagall."

Maggie nodded deferentially to him. "Yes, sir. I'll remember that." Dumbledore waved her "sir" away impatiently.

"Now, now, you are a grown woman and also a teacher. You may call me Albus, as the other teachers do. You know, two of your brothers were Head Boys? And your sister is a prefect?"

She smiled. "Yes, I know. Do — do the staff and students know that I am actually a Weasley?"

Dumbledore sighed. "No, that is not generally known. Some people who see a resemblance between you and your sister may guess, but I would prefer not to have it be general knowledge that you are actually Peggy Weasley. There was a reason why Peter Pettigrew was told to kill you and your sister, and while I do not believe either of you is the Daughter of War in the Prophecy, that will not prevent others from trying to please Voldemort by eliminating all those who may be viable candidates. I do not discount the possibility that, even with all of the precautions that we have taken, Voldemort may have many eyes and ears here at the school. While I generally feel that Hogwarts is a very safe place, we were shown last term how easily breached it could be. I do not wish to see you endangered, my dear. The students shall call you Miss Dougherty when you are teaching them and Maggie when you are a fellow student, and the staff shall call you Miss Dougherty when they are teaching you and Maggie when you are in the staff room and other venues in which you are their peer."

Harry met Dumbledore's gaze now. "Won't that get a little confusing? Some of the students may be taught by her and then sitting next to her in class."

"Not as yet. She will be teaching third and fourth year Divination students, and attending a number of first year classes. However, I am counting on the pair of you to intervene if there *should* be any — complications resulting from this arrangement. Maggie has a very full schedule. She will be teaching three mornings and one afternoon, and taking Transfiguration, Potions, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, History of Magic and Herbology during the other class periods, although she has the option of simply reading the material for History of Magic and taking the tests, so that she will have something of a break in her schedule. Severus has also offered to tutor her in Potions on the weekend, so that she may advance more quickly and perhaps join the second-year students in the spring term." Harry raised his eyebrows, but Dumbledore did not seem to see any possible problem with this plan.

"Speaking of potions, sir, who, um, is tending to the class right now?" Harry asked uncertainly. Snape bristled.

"Thank you for being so *concerned* for my students' well-being, Mr. Potter, but I asked the fifth-year Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw prefects to stay after the morning lesson, and they are currently overseeing the class. Miss Dougherty — er, Maggie — and I will be returning to the dungeons shortly for the first-year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws to have *their* class. Which classes she attends will have no connection to the fact that she is a Gryffindor."

Harry felt his face grow warm. "Is that all for now, sir?" Harry asked Dumbledore.

"Yes and no. I must ask you to convey to Ginny, Ron and Draco Malfoy the importance of not broadcasting Maggie's Weasley background. If anyone else knows — actually, *does* anyone else know?"

Harry thought, his brow furrowed. "There's Sirius and Remus. The rest of the Weasleys — which might also include Lee Jordan and Angelina Johnson, since they live at Hog's End with Percy and the twins. And Katie Bell. She just started Auror training."

Dumbledore tented his fingers and looked thoughtful. "Hmm. That puts her out of reach for the moment. Trainees are sequestered. As for Sirius and Remus, they know not to say anything. I'll pay a visit to the Burrow and to Hog's End to speak to the other people involved." He gazed seriously at Maggie. "I'm sure Harry never intended for you to be in any danger, my dear, when he set out to find you. His intentions were good. He merely wanted to reunite you with your family. We will endeavor to make certain that you are perfectly safe here, and that you receive the magical education you should have had when you were younger."

Harry felt a bit uncomfortable. *His intentions were good*. That had gotten him in trouble before. But Maggie simply smiled broadly at him. "I can never thank Harry enough for finding me, Albus. Since that day I feel like I've been living a dream I don't want to wake up from. I know I'll be safe here."

Harry looked at Dumbledore, who, disturbingly enough, did not seem so sure himself. But he nodded at the fireplace and said, "You two should probably be off to the dungeons. Have a good class, Maggie", he said kindly, before she and Snape threw Floo powder into the fire and said, "Severus Snape's office!"

When they had gone, Dumbledore motioned to the chairs in front of him. "Now, we have one or two other things to discuss, so make yourselves

comfortable." Harry and Hermione sat obediently, and Dumbledore opened his desk drawer and removed a sheaf of parchments. Harry took them awkwardly; it was a large bundle.

"What's this?" he asked Dumbledore, trying not to drop any of the parchments.

"Patrol timetables. You and Hermione should distribute them to the other prefects during lunch. Students are only patrolling four nights a week, staff are on six nights a week. Take a look so you know when you need to be on deck."

Harry unrolled one of the parchments and scanned down it for the name "Potter" while Hermione took another and did the same. The first shift started every night at nine o'clock, the second at eleven-thirty, third at two o'clock and fourth at four-thirty in the morning until seven. The castle would be patrolled by twenty-four people for ten hours a night, six people per shift.

"Here we go, Harry", Hermione said, having scanned it quickly. "On Sunday, I'm the first shift and you're the second; then I'm on third shift on Wednesday while you're on the fourth; we're both on second shift Thursday; then you're fourth shift again on Friday and I'm on third shift again Saturday."

Harry noticed that he was on duty with Ginny on Sundays at eleven-thirty until two in the morning, and swallowed. And he was with Malfoy on the fourth shift Fridays, from four-thirty to seven in the morning. Lovely, he thought. Then he noticed that Ginny was never patrolling at the same time as Malfoy, whereas Malfoy was patrolling at the same time as Mariah Kirkner on Monday from four-thirty to seven o'clock.

"So, I trust you will take care of that. Also, the pair of you will hold prefects' meetings on Sunday evenings between seven and eight o'clock, which is when I am also conducting a staff meeting. Just before eight o'clock you will adjourn the prefects' meeting so that you can come to the staff room and join that meeting, as you are the liaison between the student patrollers and the staff. Any questions?" They shook their heads, still perusing the timetables. He nodded. "Good." He opened another desk drawer now and took out a plain white envelope, which he handed to Harry. He awkwardly transferred the bundle of parchments to Hermione so he could take what Dumbledore was handing him. It didn't look at all like

parchment, but the sort of envelope typically sold by a Muggle stationer. He frowned questioningly at the headmaster.

"Your aunt sent this to me with Arabella, Harry. I thought you should see it."

He opened the envelope and a piece of yellowed paper fell out of it; Harry bent to pick it up. It was his birth certificate. "I've been waiting for this! Can I — can I try out for the Welsh national team, Professor? I mean — may I?"

But Dumbledore was already chuckling. "Of course, of course. I will arrange your transportation. The trials are at a lovely castle in Wales, where the final is to be played later this year. And Ron has already received my permission to try for England."

Harry couldn't have stopped smiling if he'd wanted to. "Oh, thank you, Professor! Thank you so much!"

Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling. "You're welcome, Harry. But I think before you say anything else, you should read the letter in that envelope."

Harry unfolded it, and as he read, he felt the color drain from his face. He looked up at the headmaster, expecting him at any moment to be replaced by some monster, to have the Polyjuice Potion wear off and reveal his true form, as Voldemort or Peter Pettigrew or Lucius Malfoy. *No*, Harry thought, *it couldn't be...*

Hermione stared at him, concerned. "What is it, Harry?"

He turned to her slowly, letting the letter slip from his hands as he whispered, "Aunt Petunia is coming to Hogwarts."

* * *

Harry was never quite sure how he got through the rest of the day. Even Trelawney's most barbed remarks went unnoticed by him during Divination. (Sandy had made some barbed remarks of her own about Trelawney — Harry thought her tongue was definitely sharper than it had been — but he chose not to share these with Ron.) After classes were finally over, he threw himself into an armchair near the fireplace in the Gryffindor common room. *Aunt Petunia at Hogwarts*. He still couldn't believe it. Ron collapsed into the next chair, moaning about the homework Trelawney had already given them. Harry had told him about his aunt at lunch, but it seemed he'd already forgotten (or it just didn't have the impact on him that it had on Harry, which was to be expected). Hermione

was sitting near the windows with a variety of books spread out on the table in front of her; she had had the last period of the day free, as the second period of Arithmancy met on Wednesday after lunch, when Harry and Ron had a free period. When she noticed Harry and Ron, she closed her books and went to join them. She rose and walked to them, kissed Ron on the forehead and perched on the arm of his chair, fixing Harry with a stern gaze that made him uncomfortable.

Finally, he burst out, "All right, tell me what I've done now..."

"It's not what you've done; it's what you *haven't* done. While I was waiting for you two, I realized that there's still something you haven't told Ron at all, and something you haven't told me in full — just a little, at Alicia's house." She raised her eyebrows meaningfully while Harry stared, perplexed. When he failed to catch on, she rolled her eyes. "You know, the reason for your being so distracted last year —"

"Oooohh!" Harry said suddenly, his eyes wide. "Yes, of course! I'm sorry. You're right. I forgot!" He had way too much to think about just now.

Ron eyes went back and forth between the two of them. "What the —"

"Let's not do this here", Hermione whispered, standing and walking toward the boys' stairs. Harry nodded, then stopped short.

"Wait — I'd rather not risk someone walking in, and it's impossible to put a fool-proof lock on the dorm door. We'll need someone to be a guard."

"But who?" Hermione said quietly. "Anyone you ask is sure to want to know why."

Then Harry spotted Ginny sitting with Ruth and Zoey. "Yeah, I know. But it's all right. I'll ask Ginny. She already knows."

"She already knows!" Ron said indignantly. "I don't even know what she knows that I don't know, but I know that I think I should have known before she knew! I mean —"

Hermione smiled and patted his arm. "That's all right, we understand. I'm sure there was a good reason Harry told her —"

"Er, yeah. I'll have to explain that too, I reckon", Harry said. "Wait a minute."

He went to Ginny, Ruth and Zoey and leaned over to whisper in Ginny's ear. "Ron and Hermione and I need your help. Do you have about an hour to spare?"

She frowned up at him, puzzled, but nodded and prepared to stand, putting her Transfiguration text down. "Bring a book", he advised her.

"You may want something to read."

Now she appeared more confused than ever, but she picked up the text and followed him to where Ron and Hermione stood waiting. Harry led them all up the stairs and into the seventh-year dorm.

When they had closed the door, he turned to them all and said, "All right. The girls already know, and now you will too, Ron." He launched into the story about the previous September first quickly, having gotten into a pattern now that he'd already told Ginny and Hermione. Ron's eyes went wide when Harry explained to him why he'd seemed so odd when he'd gotten on the Hogwarts Express the previous September. As he spoke, Harry could hardly believe that all that had happened a whole year ago. It seemed like yesterday...

"And I'm going to explain some other things about that life to you too, Ron, and you, Hermione, but I'm going to use my Pensieve to do it, so we can't afford to be disturbed. That's where you come in, Ginny. Can you — do you think you could sit on the landing and stop anyone who wants to come in? Once we're in the Pensieve, we can't know what's happening outside it, and we couldn't stop someone from looking in to see what's happening. Do you mind terribly?"

Harry saw at once that she did, and he felt dreadful. Her face closed up. Harry grimaced, then took her hand. "Will you excuse us for a moment?" he said to Ron and Hermione, leading Ginny out of the room and closing the door.

"Is that why you asked me to come up here? So I could be a glorified *guard*?"

He drew his lips into a line. "There wasn't anyone else I could ask, Ginny. You're the only other student who knows about the time change. Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape know, but I can't very well ask *them*, now can I? Please, Ginny?" he pleaded, touching her arm lightly. He could feel a shiver shudder through her under his fingers. "I'm so glad you're the first person I told after Dumbledore and Snape, I am. I'm so glad we had that night at Hog's End, talking... But I've only told Hermione a very small part so far, and until now Ron hasn't heard anything at all, and they're my best friends. You know *far* more than they do..."

"Will you tell Ron about me?"

"What?"

"About — about what we were to each other in your other life."

Harry clamped his mouth shut, thinking about this. "I — I didn't include anything in the Pensieve that would upset him, concerning that. I don't think he — he wants to see me kissing you like you're my girlfriend —" *Let alone shagging*, he thought, which even Ginny didn't know about. He wondered whether she suspected it, though. "I think I should tell him you were my girlfriend, though. I *am* going to be a little selective. There are things which would really upset him if he knew, and there's no reason to do that that I can see. So you'll do it? You'll guard the door?"

She grimaced, as though she were doing it against her better judgment. "All right. Yes, I'll do it."

Then Harry remembered something else. "Oh! I just realized something. There's a way you could see a bit of what's happening from out here. Even though you wouldn't be able to hear."

She frowned. "What?"

He removed the basilisk amulet from his robe pocket. "I've been meaning to give this back to you since the day before the wedding. It's how I knew you were in danger when you were out riding."

She took it from him, wonderment on her face. "Oh! I wondered what I'd done with that. I thought maybe it came off while I was riding, but I obviously never put it on that day..."

Harry fastened it around her neck, then leant in to kiss her on the cheek. "You'll be able to see me in the Pensieve if you hold it. All right? Will that do for now?"

She smiled and nodded. "You go. You're right; Ron's your best friend. You should tell him what you can. What won't send him over the edge, anyway", she grinned. He resisted the urge to kiss her properly and returned to the dorm, where his friends were waiting.

Of course, he wasn't prepared for how they were passing the time while they were waiting. When he reentered the room, Ron and Hermione were on Ron's bed. Hermione was lying full-length on top of him, her lips traveling down his throat to where she'd begun unbuttoning his shirt. His robes were already open, and his hands were rubbing her back and lacing into her hair as he made agonized but happy sounds, his eyes closed. Harry cleared his throat noisily, then said, "Shall I go? Would you rather do something else than —"

"Harry!" Hermione cried out, rolling off of Ron too quickly, and then rolling right onto the floor with a thud that made both boys wince and cry

out her name. She, however, sprang to her feet quickly, trying to be dignified as she brushed off her robes and smoothed her unsmoothable hair. She had probably never looked *less* dignified. Harry had to fight the urge to burst out laughing.

"Erm, are you two ready?"

Hermione was very red and Ron was buttoning his robes again, his ears bright pink. "Didn't know how long you were going to take", Ron mumbled. Harry went to his wardrobe and removed his Pensieve, placing it on his bedside table and pulling out his wand. "You'll both need your wands, too", he informed them. He knew Hermione knew what to do, but he was fairly certain that Ron had never been inside anyone's Pensieve before. Soon then had all fallen into Harry's room in Hog's End on the day he had asked it to *be* his room, when he was a little boy, before they'd bought the house. His best friends stared around the room, then at Harry, then at the Lily Evans and little Harry who were already there, oblivious to their presence. Ron's jaw had dropped and Hermione gazed in disbelief, perhaps not expecting to see this kind of evidence that Harry *really* had had a childhood with his mother.

He began to tell his best friends about his other life.

* * *

When they landed on the floor of the dorm again in a tangled heap, Ron's face was ashen and Hermione was sobbing. She threw herself on Harry, crying in earnest, and he patted her back, silent tears running down his face as well. Ron sat apart from them, his eyes swollen, an unmistakably guilty expression on his face. Harry separated himself from Hermione with some difficulty and said to his friend, "*It wasn't your fault, Ron.*"

Ron's blue eyes were dark with pain. "You killed your mum for me", he whispered hoarsely. Harry shook his head.

"No. For *her*. How could I — how could I let my own mother become a murderer for me? I couldn't let Sirius and Remus do it when I was in third year. How could I let *her*?"

They had sat on the cave floor watching the Harry and Ron in the Pensieve walk to the still form of Lily Evans on the dusty ground before Harry decided they'd seen enough for one day; it had been bad enough when he'd removed these thoughts from his mind and placed them in the Pensieve. Seeing them again with Ron and Hermione had put him on an emotional roller-coaster. Harry had guided them up and out of the

Pensieve after that. He felt empty inside, seeing himself disarm his mother again, seeing her fly backwards through the air, seeing the last expression she wore on her face before striking her head on the hard outcropping of rock that killed her.

He lifted up his glasses and wiped his eyes impatiently. He'd managed to leave out the part about his sleeping with Ginny; Ron only knew that they'd spent the night in the Quidditch changing rooms. He didn't seem to think this meant they'd slept together, so Harry didn't enlighten him. Hermione was giving him knowing looks, but she didn't say anything. She appeared to be a little hurt, and trying to hide it.

He had enjoyed showing them Jamie, though. Hermione had exclaimed, "Oh! She's so pretty, Harry!"

Ron had stood, staring, saying only, "Yeah..." Hermione had hit him impatiently with the back of her hand. "I was only trying to be agreeable", he said quickly, making Harry laugh. When Harry informed him that *his* girlfriend had actually been Cho Chang, the Head Girl, and that he was a prefect and considered the most likely person to be Head Boy the next year, Ron's jaw dropped.

However, after a few more displays of Harry/Ron interactions from his other life, Ron found himself grimacing and saying, "Well, a fat lot of good it did me to have a dad with more influence in the Ministry and to be a prefect if it made me such a prat. *I'd* have hated me too, Harry."

Harry shook his head. "I didn't hate you, Ron. It's just — well, in that life I was a Slytherin..."

It was Ron's turn to shake his head now. "I *still* can't imagine *you* as a *Slytherin*... and with *Malfoy* for your best mate..."

They sat silently on the cold stone floor of the dormitory. Ron wouldn't look at Harry. "What — what happened after that?" he wanted to know.

Harry swallowed. "The Longbottoms came to get me. I had a trial and I was convicted and sent to Azkaban."

Hermione gazed at him sadly. "*That's* why you didn't want to tell me how you wound up in Azkaban..."

"Right. Somehow I didn't think I should start with, 'You see, I killed my mum...'"

Ron shook his head. "That's just stupid. That law should be changed. Didn't you tell me that's why Katie Bell's dad went to prison? Killing his

wife by disarming her? A person shouldn't go to prison for that. If you're protecting someone else, you should be considered a hero."

Harry sighed. "Sam didn't feel like a hero for killing his wife, Ron. And I sure didn't feel like one for killing my mum. I *do* wish I could have gone to her funeral, though..." he managed to say before the sobs unexpectedly started pushing themselves out of him. Where had that come from? he wondered abruptly as he continued to cry, helpless to stop it. *He hadn't been to his mother's funeral.* Why did this suddenly matter so much? Then the door burst open and Ginny rushed in.

"Oh, Harry!" she cried before sinking to her knees and taking him in her arms, as he sobbed on her uncontrollably and clutched at her back. "I saw. I *saw*!" she said, and she didn't need to explain any more than that. Then suddenly, "*Get out, you two!*" he heard her snap to Ron and Hermione. They scrambled to their feet and he heard the door slam behind them. He knew they would wonder what on earth was going on between them, but he no longer cared; they could have stayed if they'd wanted to see him have a complete breakdown. It wouldn't matter. He held her tightly and sobbed, his tears wetting her hair and robes. He didn't care if Draco Malfoy saw them in the amulet. He didn't care about anything else just now. He just clutched at her and let himself go, and she was there for him, warm and solid and loving him.

That was all that mattered.

* * *

Harry had been greatly comforted by having Ginny with him while he mourned his mother again, but he knew it had been risky. He needed to talk to her about Draco Malfoy anyway, who also needed her right now. They were going to meet in the common room at midnight. They weren't scheduled to patrol on Tuesday nights, and no one doing the patrolling would care as long as they didn't leave Gryffindor Tower.

When he saw her face as she sat by the fire, it was all he could do not to take her in his arms again. She had seen where he and her brother and Hermione had been, in the amulet. She had seen him disarm his mother when Lily Evans' wand was pointed at Ron and her lips were forming the words of the Killing Curse. She had seen him drag her out of the lake and take her to the Quidditch changing rooms. (The next thing they all had seen was the two of them emerging from the changing rooms the following morning.)

"Ginny", he said softly.

She raised her head, completely unsurprised, and smiled at him, making his heart turn over. She'd been clutching the amulet as she waited for him, wearing her old grey dressing gown and a simple white nightdress under that.

"Harry. I've had an idea", she said before he could say what he needed to. "I was watching you, in the amulet. At first I was worried, because I couldn't see anything, although I could *feel* your presence. But all I could see was black. Then suddenly, I could see you leaving the dorm, standing on the landing in the light from the torches on the walls. And I realized: I couldn't see you in the dorm because it was completely dark. I couldn't see you at all when you weren't where there was light. Do you understand?"

He furrowed his brow, but suddenly, she pulled out her wand and pointed it at the candles around the room, putting each one out, until the fire in the grate was the only light. At last, she extinguished that too, and Harry found himself standing in pitch darkness. He felt at sea, unable to remember how close any of the furniture was to him, or how far away she was. He held out his arms in the darkness and said uncertainly, "Ginny? Ginny, where are you?"

Then his fingertips touched soft cloth, and the next thing he knew she was in his arms and he was holding her, holding her closely enough to make her part of him, as he buried his face in her hair and felt his heart leap within him. They just stood there, holding each other and rocking back and forth, when he realized that her left ear was against his cheek. He turned his head and kissed it gently, then breathed into it, making her shiver. He nipped at the lobe with his teeth, and although he would have liked to see her, he was enjoying this dark exploration, the fact that of necessity he had to find his way like a blind man, with touch and taste and smell. He pulled her earlobe into his mouth again, then slid his lips down the side of her neck, pausing to suck gently at the pulse point, while she clung to him and sighed.

"Oh, Ginny", he whispered in her ear before kissing it again. "I love you so much..."

She turned her head suddenly, her fingers fluttering over his face, tracing his lips, and then she had pulled his mouth to hers and he pushed her lips open with the tip of his tongue. Force was hardly required, though, as she was wide open to him, drinking him in. Her hands moved deftly as

they kissed, and when Harry realized this, he started moving his own hands. Soon they had each slipped off the other's dressing gown; both garments were heard falling softly to the floor. Harry's legs wouldn't support him anymore and he gently sank to the floor, taking her with him. They knelt, facing each other, kissing brows, cheeks, mouths, necks...

Harry wore only his pajama pants now — Sandy had disengaged herself and slithered off — and he felt Ginny slowly move her mouth down his neck, then onto his chest, her tongue creating a wet trail that was driving him mad. He reached out a shaking hand and unbuttoned her nightdress as she did this, removing it from her shoulders until it was around her waist.

When he lowered his mouth and took the tip of one breast in his mouth, she cried out his name with joy, and he thought he'd never heard anything so wonderful in his life. When she pulled his mouth up to hers again and placed his hands on her chest, she whispered against his lips, "I love you, Harry... I always have done..."

He moved his hands down to her waist, feeling the firm flesh there, and on her ribcage, rather than actually being able to count her ribs, as he could in his other life. There would be no possibility in this time and place, he suspected, of mistaking poor eating habits for a pregnancy. She wasn't fat, certainly, but not skeletally thin, either. She had some nice flesh on her, a healthy amount, enough to —

A pregnancy.

"Ginny", he said suddenly, desperately, trying not to touch her now. He needed her so... and yet, if it wasn't safe for reasons having nothing to do with Draco Malfoy...

"What?" she whispered, drawing her finger down his arm to his hand, which she tried to guide to her breast again. He was tempted to let her, but pulled it back before he could make contact.

"Have — have you taken the Prophylaxis Potion?"

Silence. "I — I was going to ask you whether you might have something — something Muggle. You know, from an apothecary."

"Chemist", he corrected her. "And no, I don't have anything Muggles use. If we — if we don't have any protection, we can't do this." Then he thought of something else, the thing he needed to talk to her about, which had flown clean out of his head after her first touch. There were other reasons they couldn't do this besides Harry not having been to a chemist

and Ginny not taking the potion. One reason, anyway. A reason called Draco Malfoy.

"I — I never intended for this to happen tonight, Ginny. I just wanted to talk to you. About Draco. Please — please get dressed."

He found his dressing gown and pulled it on, tying the belt impatiently, trying to calm down. She'd gotten him very worked up, but this just wasn't the time. He tried not to think of her soft skin, of the warm weight of her breasts in his hands, the salty taste of her skin...

He attempted to make his way to a chair and barked his shins on a low table, swearing loudly. Pulling out his wand, he started to wave it, but stopped, not knowing whether she was dressed again.

"Are you decent?"

"You — you don't want to see me?" she asked softly, sounding hurt.

"Of course I want to see you!" he responded without thinking, then tried to squelch that thought. "I didn't think you wanted *him* to see you. What do you do to avoid that, anyway? Shower in the dark?"

"No, just very quickly. And we're usually doing it at the same time, after running, so I was hoping he might be a bit preoccupied and not trying to see me with the amulet just then."

Harry remembered that that very morning, when he'd been coming out of the showers in the boys' prefects' bath, he'd seen Malfoy in the large tub still, holding the amulet tightly, one corner of his mouth twisted upward slightly. *He was getting an eyeful*, he realized now, feeling conflicted about whether he should tell Ginny this.

"Anyway, are you dressed again?" he asked her once more, after hearing some rustling that might indicate this. She answered in the affirmative and he pointed his wand around him at random to get some candles to light. When three sprang to life, he found his way to the fireplace and lit the fire. Sandy was sitting on the still-warm hearth, and he picked her up and let her slither into his sleeve and around his arm once more.

"Are you done now?" she asked softly.

"Yeah", he said briefly, before sitting in a chair before the hearth, his heart still beating quickly from the encounter in the darkness.

He motioned for Ginny to sit in the chair furthest from his, which should make it impossible for Draco Malfoy to see Harry using the amulet. "Ginny, I need to talk to you about Draco Malfoy." She nodded.

"You need to break up with him if we're going to be together. I — I didn't mean for — for that to happen just now. I don't want to be that sort of person. I've *been* that sort of person, and I don't want to do it again. I mean, when we — when we were meeting on top of the Astronomy Tower to go flying, I was still with Hermione. I wasn't in love with her, but I *do* love her, as my friend. I should have shown her more respect. I should have been honest with her and broken up with her. But — but I didn't see that until I fixed the timelines, until I could remember my other life.

"You see, in my other life, my mother was cheating on my stepfather."

Her jaw dropped. "Your mum was cheating on Professor Snape! Why?"

He sighed. "I was never sure. It seemed that she felt tired and overwhelmed, taking care of my twin brothers. They had porphyria, inherited from my dad — I mean, Snape. I don't know whether she originally turned away from him because she blamed him for giving her sons the disease, or she decided she was more attracted to Sirius — "

"Sirius! She was cheating on her husband with *Sirius*!"

"Yeah, well, there's no love lost between him and Snape, now is there?"

Ginny swallowed. "What if — what if my sister married him and the same thing happened? What if they had a child with this disease and she resented him for it?"

Harry looked at her levelly. "Then she should do what my mother should have done, what I should have done, and end the relationship cleanly. Except — well, in a way I understand why my mother didn't. She wanted the twins to have the two of them, united, supporting them. But still — I think that in the long run, if there *had* been a long run, the best thing would have been for her and Sirius to come clean about their relationship. Actually — my dad *did* know about them. He had accepted that their marriage was over and maintained the facade for my brothers' sake. I had to see all of this happening to other people before I realized I didn't want to do that again...

"When we're together, Ginny — and I believe that we will be, eventually — I don't want it to be the two of us sneaking around in the dark, behind Draco's back. I want to walk down the corridors of the castle holding your hand. I want to go to Christmas at the Burrow as your boyfriend. I want to make love to you in a sunny field in the middle of summer. I want — I want to *see* you. I want to see your face when —" He choked; he couldn't continue that train of thought; the memory of her was

still too vivid. It hadn't even been a few minutes..."I — I know you think you can't break up with him, but you *can*. Only — not yet. You can't possibly do it just now. He — he needs you too much right now."

She frowned, sitting up a little more. "How do you mean?"

"I mean — I've only seen him like this one other time. In my other life, after my sister died. Ginny, he tried to throw himself off the parapets. I'm really worried about him. Yes, I know he goes out of his way to be a prat at every opportunity. But we can't let ourselves play his game of pushing people away when he needs them the most. He was a good friend to me once."

She squinted at him. "What are you getting at, Harry?"

"Ginny", he said slowly, "he needs you right now. You know this. *Be* there for him. In whatever way you can. In whatever way you feel comfortable..." Harry felt himself coloring. Ginny's jaw dropped.

"Are you telling me to *sleep* with him?"

"I'm — I'm just saying that — that if you *did*, I would completely understand. You already said you'd felt tempted. I just think that you need to give him time to heal, and then break up with him when he's no longer a possible danger to himself —"

"What about a danger to other people? Especially to you?" she said hotly, still evidently upset by the implication that he wouldn't be insanely jealous if she slept with Draco Malfoy.

"I — I don't think that would happen if you did the break-up in the right way, at the right time. You have to be honest with him when the time comes. You need to tell him you don't love him, make it about *that*. That's as good a reason as any, when you think about it. Whether or not you loved anyone else, not loving *him* means you shouldn't stay together..."

"And yet you want me to *wait* to break up with him. Oh, Harry... On the day of the wedding, we weren't inside when Fleur arrived because we had gone for a walk down to the stableyard. We were sitting on a bench outside the stables, talking, and Draco took my hand and apologized for — for making my horse bolt. He told me he loves me more than life itself. He actually *said* that. And what could I say? Could I say the same thing? No. It would have been a lie. What would I do if he said the same thing again after — after making love to me? What kind of person would I be if I couldn't return his love at such a time? I think — I think that's actually the biggest thing that's been keeping me from — from giving in to him. I'm

not afraid of the act. That doesn't frighten me. It's the words that would come after... The words I can't say."

He sighed and looked down at his hands, unable to bear seeing her in the firelight, flushed with passion and anger both. "When I tried to break up with Hermione after Dudley died, Ron insisted that I couldn't. He was in love with Hermione, I *know* he was. It must have been so hard for him, and yet he went out of his way to show me that I needed her just then, and he was right. I did. Hermione — she let me forget. She let me just —"

"— just shag her repeatedly. Is that what you want me to do with Draco Malfoy?" She was seething now.

"That's not what — oh, Ginny! I haven't been a saint, you know I haven't! I wouldn't think any less of you if —"

"Well maybe *I* would think less of me, did that ever occur to you? Did it ever occur to you that I might be *ashamed* of the times when I actually wanted a man I don't love? Do you think I *liked* feeling that way? You don't know what you're asking me, Harry. I don't know how you can say you love me and sit there and — and —"

She couldn't finish, but went running up the steps to her dorm. He called her name, but he didn't want to be too loud, and finally, he turned around and stared at the fire some more, trying to forget holding her in his arms, her soft skin under his hands... but she crept into his dreams when he returned to bed, and he woke in the morning to find the sheets wrapped around him as he had dreamt her limbs were, and her name on his lips as he reached for the girl who was not beside him, the girl he was sending to another man's bed.

* * *

Classes were uneventful the next day. Harry and Ginny avoided each other while running, in the common room and at meals, but this didn't escape Hermione's notice, and she pulled him aside after Potions class was over.

"What's going on, Harry? First you fall apart over your mum — not that I blame you — and you're crying all over Ginny. Now the two of you seem to have had a fight. Would you like to enlighten me?"

He couldn't tell her about what had occurred between them, however. She might be as appalled as Ginny had been, and Ron would *certainly* be furious if it got back to him. He knew Ginny had once been convinced that she shouldn't give in to temptation because if Draco Malfoy slept with her, she thought it possible she'd never be able to get rid of him. Harry wasn't

so sure anymore. Now it seemed to be the possible proclamations of love from Draco that Ginny feared. Harry *did* know for sure that Ron and Hermione could *not* know about what had happened in the common room the night before. "I — I can't tell you", he said, remembering that he had hoped to be able to stop saying that after showing Ron and Hermione his Pensieve.

"Well, I just hope you're alive in the morning", she said ominously.

Harry frowned. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Didn't you notice? You and Malfoy are doing the fourth watch tonight. Tomorrow morning, I should say, since you start at four-thirty. Sirius and Professor Trelawney are also on the fourth watch together — poor Sirius! — and Professor Snape is on the fourth watch *again*, this time with Professor Sinistra. *Last* night he was on the fourth watch with Maggie", she added, waggling her eyebrows. "Didn't you notice on the schedule?"

"Er, no. I only looked for my name." Which wasn't strictly true, but mostly true.

"Well, tonight I'm on third watch, so I'm going to bed right after dinner. That way I'll still get about six hours of sleep before two o'clock. I'm on with Ernie MacMillan, from Hufflepuff, and the teachers are Maggie, Professor McGonagall, Hagrid and Professor Sprout. I'm going to try to get some work done in the common room when my watch is done; I think if I try to go to sleep again, there's no way I'll be up at six-thirty to get ready for running."

"Yeah, well can you come pull me out of bed at four-thirty? I don't know how I'll get up otherwise."

"Go to bed right after dinner, like me. That way you'll get a good eight hours."

"That's so early, Hermione! I can't just *make* myself go to bed at eight o'clock."

She shrugged. "Suit yourself. If I have to use force to get you out of bed at four-thirty, I will", she said, smirking.

He smirked right back. "Oh yeah? See what happens to you if you do..."

But his first watch went well. He didn't manage to get to sleep until ten o'clock, after tossing for two hours, but when he awoke at four, without help, he dressed quickly in the cold room and trod softly down to the common room. He sat by the fire, shivering, and Hermione was surprised

to see him when she returned. He was not awake enough to trust his voice, so he nodded at her as she plodded to the armchair where he'd been sitting, collapsing with exhaustion. He thought it unlikely she was going to get any work done.

He met Draco Malfoy in the entrance hall, along with Hagrid, Maggie and Professors Sprout and McGonagall. They agreed on a way to split up the castle and began their rounds. Harry held his wand out as he walked, when he saw that Malfoy did too. What was truly disconcerting was that Draco Malfoy seemed to be behaving as though he'd never met him before. No insults, no snide remarks. Harry had wanted to try to draw him out, to find out how he was doing since the wedding, but there were no opportunities for introducing the topic. When their shift drew to a close, Malfoy revealed that he'd worn his running clothes under his robes; he waited for Harry to return to Gryffindor Tower to change. Harry came back to the entrance hall a little while later with Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Tony and Ruth, finding Draco and Mariah waiting. Draco left his robes in a bundle on the edge of the pitch while they ran and continued the not-talking to such an extent that even Ron appeared disconcerted, and like he might like to counter an insult or two about Weasleys.

Classes were finally getting more interesting. They had another Charms lesson, but this time they broke up into small groups for a practical lesson, with the prefects in each group leading the way. After that, they had their first Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson with Professor Figg, who reminded Harry so eerily of her brother that he kept expecting her to shout *CONSTANT VIGILANCE* any moment. (Crouch really had done a good Moody impression.)

And then, after lunch, they were to mount their broomsticks and fly to Hogsmeade for their first Apparition lesson. Only the Slytherins were joining them; the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaw would have their lessons at different times.

Harry noticed how fiercely Hermione clutched her broomstick handle as she flew, remembering how nervous she'd been before flying into the forest to rescue Professor Snape and Draco Malfoy. She was using a school broom, as she still didn't have one of her own. He suspected it would be even harder to convince her to get a broom once she'd mastered Apparition. She *really* wouldn't see the point, then.

All of the Gryffindor and Slytherin students attended the first lesson, except for Draco Malfoy and Ron. Sirius introduced himself, smiling at them all, but looking very nervous, as though everyone might start screaming and cringing from him any minute. Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil *did* seem to avoid getting too close to him, and Seamus' eyes were rather round the entire time. Pansy Parkinson, on the other hand, simpered and flirted shamelessly. ("He's a *teacher*!" Hermione hissed at Harry and Neville, indignant, while she glared at Pansy.)

After the class, Harry knew he had to finally speak to Sirius about the things he'd told Ron and Hermione. He'd told Snape before Sirius, and he just knew he shouldn't leave Sirius in the dark any more. He didn't think he'd need the Pensieve to convince him, and he didn't want to show it to him, anyway, lest any unflattering images of the Sirius in his other life crept in. His godfather let him talk and talk, as they sat in the echoing, empty village hall, and when the sun was going down, he pulled Harry to him in a hug, then released him, searching his face.

"You're not a child anymore, Harry", he said suddenly. Harry hadn't held anything back from Sirius except the other Sirius' involvement with his mother. He knew all about the pregnancy scare, and the Quidditch changing rooms. Harry shook his head.

"How could I be?" he choked out, trying not to cry again. Sirius clapped him on the shoulder.

"Well, I think you've made some mistakes you're never likely to make again. That's the important thing."

Harry nodded and they left the hall and mounted their broomsticks to return to the castle. He felt like a great weight had been lifted from him as he flew. He still missed his `dad', Severus Snape, but as Snape hadn't shown any interest in being a father-figure to him, even after seeing the Pensieve, Harry knew he had to give Sirius a chance. Sirius had wanted to be a kind of father to him since his third year. He found himself in the awkward position now of trying to be a father to a man, not a boy, but Harry wanted to let him know he still needed parenting, still needed someone to talk to, someone to advise him. He smiled at the dark man flying next to him, and Sirius nodded back with understanding. For once, Harry had no doubt that he'd done the right thing.

* * *

That night, Harry was paired with Hermione for the second watch. When they went to bed at two in the morning, Harry was glad that they didn't have any classes first thing on Friday. They had History of Magic before lunch, but the other runners allowed him and Hermione to sleep late. They ate breakfast with everyone else and then went running during the first period, showering before Binns' class. All day, Harry was very excited, since Saturday was drawing nearer, when he would go to Wales to try out for the national team. He tried not to think about his falling-out with Ginny, but it was difficult. When he had no control over his thoughts, in his dreams, she was in his arms again, evaporating when he awoke.

After spending the afternoon out-of-doors at Herbology (it was still good weather, so they were working in the gardens, not the greenhouses) and Care of Magical Creatures, they returned to the common room, where everyone seemed to be in a party mood. Someone produced some butterbeers and crisps, and Ron and Seamus went to the kitchens, returning with more substantial food and pitchers of pumpkin juice. Harry managed to relax and forget his troubles for once, but when he rose to refill his goblet at one point, a piece of paper fell from his robes, and it was Ginny who picked it up.

"Harry", she called to him, as though being helpful against her better judgment. "You dropped something." She unfolded it. "Oh! It's your birth certificate. Are you carrying this around for tomorrow?"

Annika and Zoey had been standing near her, and they pounced on the piece of paper now. "Oooh!" Zoey cried out, looking over Ginny's shoulder. "Look at Harry's little footprints! So cute!"

"Give me that —" he started to say irritably, but now Ginny was looking at the back of the paper, where his parents' birth dates were given.

"Funny", she said. "Your dad's birthday is less than a week after yours. The fifth of August, 1960."

Hermione's head swung round. "Really? Are you sure, Ginny?" He could practically see the wheels were turning in her head again.

"Very. It's right here." She showed Hermione while Harry made a swipe for the paper and missed.

"Oh, and look", Hermione said now, pointing to Harry's mother's birth date. "Harry — your mum's birthday is less than a week after Ginny's."

Harry stopped reaching for it and frowned at her. "Um, no it isn't Hermione. It's exactly a week. Has Arithmancy destroyed your ability to

add? One plus seven is eight."

Hermione grimaced at him. "I *know* that, Harry. Why are you saying that?"

"Because my mum's birthday was the eighth of April, that's why."

Hermione opened her eyes wide. She glanced down at Harry's birth certificate, then back up at him. "Not according to this."

She handed the paper to him and he stared at it, wondering whether it was a simple clerical error at the hospital. How could his own mother not know when her birthday was, after all? He remembered her being very adamant about its being on the eighth, when he was small and had been eavesdropping on the adults in Lucius Malfoy's study, during the Christmas party.

He stared down at the paper again. And then he noticed something else. Not only was his mother not born on April the eighth, according to his birth certificate, but where it gave her place of birth, it said very clearly, "*Appleby Magna, Leicestershire*."

Parapets

Harry stared at the paper; for some reason, the hair on the back of his neck was standing up. It was a perfectly ordinary birth certificate, but it wasn't the one from the British government. His aunt had said in her terse letter that she didn't trust him not to lose it (some things, he thought, would never change). Instead, she'd sent him the hospital certificate, which had an old-fashioned-looking engraving of St. Dawyd's Hospital on the front, where he'd been born, in addition to his name, birth date and place of birth written in elegant script (*Harry James Potter, born 31 July, 1980, Cardiff, Wales*), his weight at birth (*seven pounds, four ounces*), length (*twenty-one inches*), and the name of the doctor who'd delivered him (*F.X. O'Sullivan*).

The back of the document bore his mother's thumb-prints, his very small newborn footprints, his parents' names, and the places and dates of their births. He stared thoughtfully at his father's information for a moment, never having really looked at it. James Godric Potter, it turned out, had been born 5 August, 1960 in Bath. *Why Bath?* he wondered. But his mother... his mother, according to this, had been born exactly four months before, on 5 April, 1960, in Appleby Magna, Leicestershire.

He wandered to a chair and sat with a thump, staring at the paper. Then he almost immediately sprang out of the chair again and ran to his dorm; he flung open his trunk and rifled through it until he found the shoebox where he saved his correspondence. Unfortunately, that was as far as his organization went; the letters he'd received over the previous years since he'd gotten his Hogwarts letter (which was at the bottom) were piled higgledy-piggledy in the box, parchments mixed with the Muggle stationery Hermione usually used when she wrote, and the occasional post card and birthday card. He finally found what he was looking for and raced back down to the common room.

"You already knew all about it, Hermione!" he told her breathlessly, waving the letter at her that she'd written to him earlier in the summer. He'd found it on his desk on the day he'd returned home from work and found Yvonne Martin watching his Aunt Petunia using magic to clean the kitchen. He pulled it out now and read portions of it.

"Both of her parents were also teachers. They're retired. They moved to Leicestershire in 1973, after their daughter Valerie died from leukemia. Evidently, when they were in London at St. Michael's hospital, they met a family from Appleby Magna — the mother also had cancer, so they were in the same unit rather a lot — and they wanted to move to London so she'd be closer to St. Michael's. The Doughertys wanted to move *away* from London, to try to put the loss of their daughter behind them, so they moved into the Leicestershire house and paid the other family rent..."

He raised his face to Hermione's, grinning. "Don't you see? The family that they were paying rent to — it was my mother's parents! Maggie grew up in the same house as my mother and aunt!" Hermione looked back at him in amazement, her eyes very large.

"I don't understand, Harry. Why do you think —"

"*Snape's Pensieve!*" he hissed to her under his breath. "When we saw him visiting my mum in Godric's Hollow", he reminded her, whispering, "my Aunt Petunia also visited, remember? She was reaming out my mum for not saving my grandmother —"

Hermione's eyes were now wide with understanding. "That's right! I'd forgotten!" She frowned. "But that still doesn't mean —"

Harry was the one staring into space now. "And there's something else..." he said slowly. "When you first told me where the house was, at number ten Highgrove, I've been trying to work out where I've heard that address before." He reached through his troubled, crowded memory and remembered many, mornings, as a small boy, waking up to the sound of rude pounding on his cupboard door...

"Get the post, you lazy thing! Make yourself useful for once!"

(This despite the fact that he did most of the cleaning round the house.)

Grumbling, he stumbled out from under the stairs and shuffled toward the front door, bending over to pick up the post from the welcome mat as though he were an old man. Bills, adverts, a postcard from Aunt Marge, and an envelope addressed to "Mrs. Vernon Dursley, Number 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey." He turned it over, and on the back, with no name, was the address of origin for

the envelope: Number 10 Highgrove Street, Appleby Magna, Leicestershire.

And then there was the occasional terse question from his uncle to his aunt: "Have they paid the rent yet? It's not my fault they're teachers, is it? If they did something sensible for a living, maybe they wouldn't fall behind on the rent when they have unexpected expenses suddenly. You'd think I killed her uncle, just so they'd have to pay for the funeral..."

Like most children, Harry didn't pay particular attention to the financial discussions he heard in the Dursley home. He was frequently reminded — very loudly — of what a financial burden he was on his long-suffering aunt and uncle, but, as he saw whenever they were lavishing gifts on Dudley, they were clearly in no danger of being destitute, so he didn't take any of it seriously. He actually would have been quite happy to have the Grunnings drill factory fail and for his aunt, uncle and cousin to experience living in an unsavory place with spiders crawling over *their* skin all the time, even though he'd have to live with them under these conditions as well. But then he realized that they'd probably find some way to blame him for a Grunnings failure, and they'd probably take their miserable new life-style out on him in some way, and in the end he'd come to the conclusion that they were most harmless when happily getting by with enough money and toys, so that they didn't need to resort to Harry-beating for entertainment.

"For years, the Doughertys have been paying rent to my Aunt Petunia! I remember seeing the envelopes. Maggie *definitely* grew up in my mum's house."

"Okay", Ron said, frowning, trying to process the information. "So my sister grew up in the same house where your mother lived. That still doesn't explain why your mum was born three days earlier than you thought."

Harry narrowed his eyes, thinking. "Well, if we add five and four and the numbers in the year 1960..." He paused. "We get twenty-five. That reduces to seven, right Hermione? Now, stop me if you think I'm wrong, but I think my mum is probably the first Daughter of War in the prophecy. I mean, can you think of any other woman who had more to do with

Voldemort's fall?" He noticed that Zoey and Annika winced at the name, but Harry plowed on. Ron, Ginny and Hermione no longer batted an eye when he did this.

"Not me", Ron said, shrugging. "I mean — if she hadn't died —" His voice trailed off, and he swallowed. Harry remembered his reaction to Harry's Pensieve, his finding out first that the world had changed so drastically when his mother *hadn't* died, and then that Harry had killed his mother to save Ron's life, and had gone to Azkaban because of that.

"Right. So if we add seven to the lion's eleven and the Moon Child's five, that gives us twenty-three, which then becomes five after you add the two and three.. If the first triangle is half of the second, that makes the second one ten. Which becomes one when you add the one and zero!" he said triumphantly. Still grinning he went on, "And five and one make six, the total for the two triangles!"

Hermione looked uncertain. "I don't know, Harry... I was so *sure* that Annie Weasley was the second Daughter of War..."

Harry stopped and thought again. "Well, the second triangle has to total ten, if I'm right about this. So we start with eleven and five, which makes sixteen. If the total for the three people is in the twenties, it would have to be twenty-eight for it to break down to ten. Or thirty-seven, if it's in the thirties. Twenty-eight is twelve more than sixteen. Thirty-seven is twenty-one more."

Ron's face lit up. "Those both become three when you break them down! And you missed the teens; nineteen is just three away from sixteen. No matter how you add it, the second Daughter's number has to be three, if the total is going to be ten!" Harry and Hermione looked at him, shocked. He turned pink. "What, I can't learn a little about Arithmancy during the hols?"

Then Harry remembered Sandy speaking to him on the shores of Loch Ascog: *The Daughter is three*. Sandy had already told him.

"So", Ron said now, "the question is: was your mum trying to hide that she was in the Prophecy?" Harry remembered her arguing with Lucius Malfoy, in his other life. She'd been very adamant about her birthday. If there was anyone she would want to convince about her *not* being in the Prophecy, it was Lucius Malfoy. Voldemort too, of course, but Malfoy was very nearly as important. Perhaps she had started out simply lying to him and that explained everything. And then she had to be consistent about it.

Every year on the eighth of April, Harry remembered that they celebrated her birthday. She couldn't afford for one of her children to slip and mention the real date to anyone. Draco Malfoy was Harry's and Jamie's best friend. He could have inadvertently mentioned her real birthday to his father and endangered her.

"Looks that way", Harry said quietly, looking down at the certificate again. In his other life, she'd married Severus Snape, who had told her about the prophecy before the timelines had changed. Perhaps it had been his idea to pretend that she had a different birthday. Harry knew he would have done anything to protect her, or make her happy.

"But", Hermione said now, an alarmed note in her voice, "if she was hiding her true birthday, does that mean that Voldemort knew what the totals should be for the two triangles? Does that mean he knows what the number should be for the second Daughter of War?"

Harry's heart had leapt into his throat. "Could be. Ron — is it at all possible that your older sisters weren't actually born when they think they were? Well, Maggie definitely wasn't born when she thought. But what about Annie? And you, Ginny —" he said reluctantly, since she was hacked off at him. "Have you ever seen your birth certificate?"

Ginny shook her head. "What you're saying doesn't make sense, Harry. My mum is sure to remember very well when each of us was born..."

"Not if she was memory-charmed. Remember, Pettigrew lived with your family for years, and he didn't have the nerve to kill your sisters when he was only nineteen, and took them away to protect them."

Harry looked around the common room, at the clusters of students socializing and relaxing. He hated to think of any of the Weasleys being in danger; they were like family to him. Then his eyes opened wide. There was another group that was like family to him — and to the Weasleys as well. "Wait! The centaur told Bill the Daughter of War would come from his family —"

Ron shrugged. "I remember. I'm assuming that's why you want to know my mum's birthday..."

Hermione stood excitedly. "And Mrs. Weasley told us about being taken up north during the war, when she was a child. She's surely a Daughter of War!"

"No, no", Harry said, "I mean — sure, that's a possibility. But I just thought — Bill had another family. *This* family. Gryffindors. All

Gryffindors are family, really. The centaur *might* have meant another Gryffindor, not necessarily a blood relation..."

"Well, then, it could be *anyone*, Hermione said dejectedly.

"It does give us more possible candidates, but that's better, isn't it? Rather than running out of people to consider? And it would mean Voldemort has to figure it out still, too. He's in the same position we are."

"Maybe", Ron intoned ominously. "I wouldn't be so sure. If Pettigrew *did* know who the other Daughter of War was, he might have told him. Or he could just decide to try to get rid of *all* Gryffindors." Or *all* Weasleys, Harry thought, shuddering. "Or", Harry added shakily, "he might have deliberately told him the wrong person was the Daughter of War, and that's another reason why he wants to be beyond Voldemort's reach. Can you think of any other reason why he'd turn himself in? Knowing that he'd be going to Azkaban? Whatever he's expecting Voldemort to do to him, it must be far worse than dementors. Which means he must have done something *really* bad as far as Voldemort's concerned."

"And", Hermione continued, "if you're right, it would mean Voldemort already knows Wormtail gave him the wrong name."

"Maybe. He could just be preparing for the worst", Harry countered.

The four of them were silent for a few minutes, but then Ron yawned and stretched. "Blimey, I could do with some dinner. And bed right after that. Tryouts for the English team tomorrow."

Harry opened his eyes wide. "Oh! That's right! I forgot you were trying out too!"

Ron grinned at him. "Think you'll make the Welsh team?"

"Dunno. How are we getting to the tryouts?"

"Remus is taking me by Floo from the Three Broomsticks. I'm to fly down to the village in the morning with Professor McGonagall. The place is somewhere in Kent; big wizarding estate. No Muggles around for miles, and they've got anti-Muggle charms on the perimeter of the property, just in case. Remus said Sirius is meeting you in the entrance hall after breakfast. He has a Portkey for the two of you."

"Sirius is coming with me?" Harry said, feeling a little better.

"Sure. You don't think Dumbledore would let you go alone? After you left St. Mungo's like that, without telling any of us you were all right? As it is, he wasn't sure he'd let either of us do this. Remus told me; it was touch and go, but between the two of them, he and Sirius convinced him.

Personally, I think I'll probably feel terrifically out of practice. I'll probably stink like an old egg."

Harry grimaced. "No you won't. You'll run rings around the others. *I'm* going to make a complete fool of myself..."

Hermione was rolling her eyes. "All right, all right. Let's go eat before we get into some kind of who-will-do-worse contest." She grinned and pulled on both of their hands, and they cheerfully let themselves be led to the portrait hole. When they were in the corridor, Harry wistfully looked over his shoulder at Ginny for a second before the portrait banged shut again.

* * *

After the evening meal, Sirius stopped at the Gryffindor table to him to tell him about the plan for the morning, and Harry listened patiently, pretending he didn't already know. He followed Ron's lead and turned in after dinner, so he'd be well-rested. He was supposed to take the fourth patrol shift at four-thirty in the morning, but Tony Perugia had agreed to trade with him, so Harry was taking the first shift for Tony the following evening. He was afraid he was taking advantage of Tony, trading a nine-o'clock shift for one at such an ungodly hour, but Tony seemed quite happy about it. Then he found out that Tony was going to be doing revision with Ruth in the common room at nine o'clock on Saturday night, and he stopped wondering about the deal he'd struck.

He was to meet Sirius in the entrance hall at eight-thirty, right after eating breakfast. Or rather, after having *tried* to eat breakfast; he could barely choke down a piece of toast and some orange juice. His usual nervous loss of appetite was plaguing him, as it did before every Quidditch match, and he hoped he wouldn't faint from hunger if the Seeker tryouts lasted a very long time. While he was waiting for Sirius to finish breakfast, Professor McGonagall left for the village with Ron, and soon after, Snape emerged from the Great Hall with Maggie beside him. They were deep in conversation, but he stopped when he saw Harry in his Gryffindor Quidditch gear, then looked like the reason for this attire had occurred to him; his eyes widened and he nodded.

"Good luck, Pot —" He cleared his throat, looking sideways at Maggie. "Good luck, Harry", he corrected himself. Harry wished he could come with them.

Maggie laughed, looking at Harry. "Is that how you dress for Quidditch? What is it — like football on broomsticks?"

"Not quite —" he began, but Sirius was coming out of the Great Hall now, grinning at him. Harry wasn't sure what else he *should* wear. He'd donned the usual protective equipment under the robes, as well, wondering whether perhaps he would be required to do without it. He had no other Quidditch gear.

"You look just like —" Sirius started to say, and Harry hoped he wasn't going to bring his father up again. It wasn't the time to get maudlin. He seemed to change his mind and asked Harry, "All set?" Sirius also had a broomstick slung over his back with a sturdy-looking leather strap that was attached to the broom handle at the end and just above where the twigs began. It looked like one of the school brooms.

Harry nodded. Sirius took the Portkey out of his pocket. It was a brown bottle which had once held lager. "Hold on, Harry. We'll be off in a couple of minutes."

Harry clutched his broom firmly in one hand and the neck of the bottle in the other. After waiting only a couple of minutes, he suddenly felt like he couldn't have removed his hand from the bottle if he'd tried; it seemed to be glued in place. And then he felt that distinctive hook behind his navel pulling him into a whirling vortex. Snape, Maggie and the entrance hall were gone, and there was just whirling confusing, his broom, Sirius and *his* broom, and swirling robes...

They landed with a thump. Harry stumbled a little, but did not fall. Still, he hoped no one was watching him. He felt shaky and nervous and like he just might spew.

They were atop the wall of an enormous grey-stoned castle. It wasn't like Hogwarts castle, a place where you could live and go to school. The castle walls were topped by what could be called an elliptical road, twenty feet wide, bordered by chest-high parapets, and Harry was strongly reminded of pictures he'd seen of the Great Wall of China, but on a smaller scale. He could see that, enclosed within the curving walls, was a space that was perfectly-sized for playing Quidditch without too many prying Muggles being able to see what was going on. Harry knew that the castle was somewhere in Wales, but he wasn't sure where, precisely. Looking down, he saw that the two levels below the parapets seemed to have large openings in the walls all around, looking toward the interior. Most of the

openings were covered by heavy tarpaulins, fastened with ropes laced through rings sunk into the stone masonry. One or two were open, revealing serried rows of benches for the spectators to watch the game. On the ground, very far away, it seemed, Harry could see doors which probably gave onto team changing facilities and the like. He'd never seen a Quidditch pitch like this; the seating being below the parapets meant that the spectators were sheltered from the weather, but their view of players flying very high would also be obscured.

He stood at the edge, holding onto the stone barrier with one hand, wondering why there was no one else around. He looked at Sirius momentarily, with alarm, waiting to find out that he wasn't his godfather at all, but another Death Eater who'd been taking Polyjuice Potion...

But moments later, loud *pops!* starting erupting all over the grassy field far below and on the castle walls as well, as numerous black-robed witches and wizards appeared, wands drawn before they determined that there was no immediate danger. They were quickly followed by the players for the Welsh national team, reporting for work, also popping onto the pitch and the walls, wearing red and green robes. Harry reckoned the black-robed people were Aurors. Security. He felt Sirius tense up beside him. The witches and wizards in red and green robes began to gather in small clumps, ignoring the Aurors, smiling and laughing as they greeted each other. Harry noticed some players for the Caerphilly Catapults, the Harpies, and other teams. He looked at Sirius uncertainly. *I don't belong here*, he thought, his stomach in knots.

"Harry!" He swung his head around; Owen Aberystwyth was striding toward him, grinning and holding out his hand. Harry felt like his arm might come out of its socket if Owen decided to be much more enthusiastic about greeting him. He did his best to grasp the older man's hand hard, to avoid having his knuckles crushed. "Welcome!" Owen said, grinning, once he'd released Harry's sore hand. Then he noticed Sirius, and his eyes opened wide. He went white, and he was already a very pale man. "You — you're — I mean — you must be —"

"Sirius Black", Sirius said to him, holding out his hand and giving Owen an ironic half-smile. Owen did not take his hand but continued to stare, wide-eyed, at Sirius, who finally put his hands in his pockets, his mouth drawn into a line. Harry wondered how much of that Sirius had

experienced since he had been cleared. *You'd think he hadn't been exonerated at all*, Harry thought, trying not to feel angry.

Instead, he decided to get some information about where he was. Waving his arm over the rolling wooded landscape outside the castle, he asked Owen, "Where are we, exactly?"

"Well, you could say it's Tomen Castell. Except it's not. It's on the same site, but Tomen was just earth and timber. When Muggles look at this, all they see is a mess of trees growing on what used to be the motte. They don't bother with it. This was actually built by the great Llywelyn ap Iorwerth, who was born at Tomen. He also built the stone castle at Dolwyddelan. That's the name of the village over yonder." He nodded toward a distant cluster of houses that Harry could barely discern through the abundant greenery. "It's not generally known that he was a wizard, you know. At any rate, this was built special for Quidditch and has been hidden from the start, with spells and such. This is where the European Cup final is being played, in December", he said proudly. "We're hoping to be in the final, of course", he added, raising his eyebrows at Harry. "Best place in all of Britain for the game, in my opinion. Some folk — well, they don't like having an established *place* for it. Prefer to move around. But the folk over in our village —" he gestured "— are the sort of Muggles who are magic-tolerant, so we like it here."

Sirius and Harry looked shocked, so he elaborated. "I don't mean they *know* about us, *per se*", he said quickly. "They sort of — well, whenever one of'em maybe sees something he oughtn't, he just tells himself, real sensible-like, that it *couldn't* be. Goes about his business without anyone needing to throw around any memory charms. Most Muggles whose families have lived in the same place for generations are the same; they have family stories that have been handed down, so they know there are some things in certain places which can't be explained with their logic and science, and they don't bother trying. They don't look too close. A bit of superstition, if you like, but it works out for us."

Harry nodded, seeing that Owen, while explaining why the castle seemed so perfect for Quidditch, had relaxed a little about Sirius, who was nodding and looking around at the landscape. "This is a good location", Sirius agreed. "I was afraid it would be at Conwy, a little further north."

"We're *in* Conwy still", Owen said, sounding annoyed.

"I mean the castle of the same name —" Sirius tried to explain, grimacing. But Owen was relaxing again.

"Nah. Too close to the sea. Easier to control access by Muggles from land. If ships are passing, or even small pleasure-craft, we can't guarantee they wouldn't see people flying on broomsticks. Not from the sea. Nah, we're well away from the sea here."

Sirius nodded and Harry tried to relax a little. However, he tensed up again when he saw a dark-haired woman in red Quidditch robes walking toward them, carrying a gleaming broomstick that made Harry wish he'd taken out his broomstick repair kit that morning and worked on his, so it didn't look like it had been sitting around for a month, gathering dust. Some of his twigs were a little bent out of shape, even though it was still practically new.

"Erica, come here and meet one of the possibilities for new reserve Seeker", Owen said to her, smiling. Harry recognized her as Erica Welch, the witch who had taken over for Audra Griffiths on the Holyhead Harpies.

Harry nodded as he shook her hand. "Nice to meet you." Her eyes went up to his forehead automatically.

"Nice to meet you, too", she said, her eyes widening when she saw Sirius. Then she turned to Owen abruptly and said, "Twenty-five Galleons, right?"

Owen gave her a half-smile. "Right. Twenty-five Galleons. Or the equivalent in Muggle money, whichever you prefer." He turned to Harry again. "Damned difficult to come by Galleons these days, what with the Gringotts mess."

"Right", Harry said, a bit confused.

When a small, thin man of indeterminate age *popped!* into existence about six feet away, Owen cried, "Jean-Claude!"

The small man, who had some grizzled growth on his face but bright brown eyes and sharp cheekbones, strode toward Owen and shook his hand. He wore a close-fitting grey T-shirt and carried brown robes over his arm. He had a very worn-looking broom that made Harry feel a little better about his.

"I would not meess theess for anyzing, Owain. Zey deed not `ave any openings on ze French team, so..."

Owen nodded. "So this is your chance to play in the European Cup, if you're lucky. I know what you mean."

Harry stared at the small thin man, who had a mix of dark and grey hair, but strong, tanned, wiry-looking arms. He couldn't have been over five-feet four inches, and Harry was strongly reminded of some of the jockeys he and Draco Malfoy had seen when they'd gone to the track to watch Alicia ride Granny's Ghost to victory.

"Um", Harry began awkwardly, speaking to Owen, "aren't you supposed to be from Wales to be on the Welsh team?" His own voice sounded very strange to him.

Owen grinned. "Jean-Claude Jones' dad is as Welsh as you and me, Harry. His mum is French, and he grew up there and went to school there, but he was born a little north of here, where his dad's from. How is the old trouble-maker, Jean?"

The small man gave them all an ironically Gallic smile, one head cocked to the side. "Still making trouble, as you say. Some things never change, n'est ce pas?"

"Truer words were never spoken, old boy —" Owen said, shaking his head. Harry swallowed. So, he was up against an old friend of Owen's. Brilliant. And he was almost the same size Harry was when he was just starting out as a Seeker. He was the perfect build, small and lithe. Harry felt large and awkward. *I should have switched to being a Keeper*, Harry thought. *Look at him; what made me think I could still do this?*

Then another man *popped* onto the wall nearby, and Owen greeted him enthusiastically as well. He was quite pale and his dark hair had some scattered grey in it. He wasn't much taller than Jones, but even more muscular. Harry didn't catch his last name, but his first name was Neil.

"All right, now, listen up, you three", Owen said when the cursory introductions were over. "This is how it is. You see before you", he waved at the players now flying about the pitch in their red and green robes, for the most part never going higher than the parapets, "our team, both the starters and reserves. There's a mix on the two teams — red and green — so don't get any ideas that one or the other is better. I'm paying each player on those teams twenty-five Galleons — although that may wind up being in Muggle money — for every ten points they score today. I'm also paying each person on the winning team a bonus of another two-hundred Galleons. You four", he said, motioning to Harry, Erica, Jean-Claude and Neil, "will all be looking for the Snitch. When one of you three catch it", he added, pointing at the Harry and the other two men, "the game will be

over and whichever team has the most points from goals alone at that point will win. If Erica catches it first, she will release it again and we keep going until one of you three show me which one of you deserves to be my new reserve Seeker. Erica will be paid twenty-five Galleons for every time she catches the Snitch and releases it."

He glared at the three would-be Seekers now, his eyes narrowed. "In case you don't understand your situation, let me be clearer about it. Every player out there wants to make this stretch on as long as possible, because the longer it does, the more money they make. That means they *don't want you three to catch the Snitch*. You are not playing for a team today; you're playing for yourself. Usually you have two Beaters hitting Bludgers toward you and two away from you. Today there will be *four* Beaters hitting Bludgers toward you and *no one* hitting them away from you. There is no one out there that you can count as a friend, *and* you're not just competing against two other people trying out for Seeker, you're also competing against our *current* Seeker, who, lest you forget, just led the Holyhead Harpies to victory in the League final." Erica Welch glowed, but also looked a little bashful about this. Harry swallowed.

"There will be no fouls called. For any player. The others all know that if one of them needs to stop playing, they will not be paid at all, even if their team wins. If any of you get hurt and need to land, that's too bad. The moment you touch the grass, you're done, you're out of the running. Are there any questions?"

Harry looked at Neil and Jean-Claude, who ignored him and glared back at Owen stubbornly.

"Good", Owen said in reply to their silence, clapping his hands together once. "Oh, and I almost forgot. If one of you three catch the Snitch before Erica, you'll be on the team, but not as reserve Seeker. If that happens — *Erica* will be the reserve Seeker", he said, looking at her out of the corner of his eye. Harry noticed the truculent expression she wore, thinking, *She's not just playing for money. She's playing for her job.*

Harry swallowed and glanced at Sirius. He'd never felt so nervous in his life. This was unlike any other type of match he'd ever experienced. He thought about just backing out, saying that he'd changed his mind... but then he pictured the *Daily Prophet* headline if that happened...

HARRY POTTER TOO COWARDLY TO EVEN TRY OUT FOR
WELSH TEAM;
SHOULD HE STILL BE HEAD BOY OF HOGWARTS?

He shook himself, annoyed that he was thinking of the press. *I'm going to do my best, and no one can ask for more.*

Soon everything was a blur; Owen blew on a whistle and the other Seekers threw on their robes, mounted their brooms and sped to the middle of the pitch. Harry then leapt on his broom and followed, glad his new broom was more obedient than the last one he'd had. Soon the players were zipping over the field at blinding speeds, the Chasers on the Green team tossing the Quaffle back and forth to each other with pinpoint precision, but failing to get it past the Red team's Keeper anyway. One of the Red Chasers caught the Quaffle when their Keeper hurled it almost the length of the pitch and raced toward the Green team's hoops. The Chaser fainted and scored, so it was ten points for the Red team.

Harry was admiring the Chaser's skill a moment too long, though; he turned his head, saw a Bludger only a half-dozen feet away and quickly ducked, feeling his hair move as it swished over his head. He sat up again and shook himself, then flew toward the edge of the pitch, resolving to ignore the Chasers, no matter how interesting they were, and concentrate on not being killed by a Bludger.

And look for the Snitch.

He scanned the field with his eyes; there was so much activity, it was difficult to see what was really going on. The Quaffle and the Bludgers were being hurled or beaten about, the Chasers and Beaters were zooming back and forth, circling each other, looping and rolling...

Then Harry noticed what the other Seekers were doing. Jean-Claude was flying on the tail of a Green Beater for some reason, and Neil was flying in circles near the Red goal. Erica was looping around the Green goal hoops, looking around very avidly. Suddenly, she went into a dive and Harry saw a gold flash lower down on the field. He shot toward it, noticing even as he drew nearer that *his broom was faster than hers*. He was inching ahead of her, bit by bit, seeing the Snitch fluttering down there...

Harry grunted and struggled to keep his grip on his broom as a massive wizard in green collided with him. He looked at Erica with alarm, expecting her to get to the Snitch first, but the Green player had hit her before Harry, and she was hanging from her broom by one hand. Harry felt a sharp pain in his side and wondered if he'd broken some ribs; it was suddenly quite excruciating to draw breath. He glanced down quickly and no longer saw the flash of gold. He was about to glare at the wizard, but he was already gone, carrying the Quaffle toward the Red Keeper.

Erica scrambled back onto her broom, her face dark with rage. She sped away from Harry, and he turned to see two Red players bearing down on him, looking like they were up to no good. When they were almost upon him, he suddenly dove, and then he heard a yell behind him; they'd collided with their own teammate, a Beater who had now dropped his bat. Harry watched it fall, not the least bit sorry to see it go. Unfortunately, he left his guard down too long, and another Red player flew hard into the tail of his broom while yet another player, coming from the opposite direction, put his hand out and gave his broom handle a hard *push*. Suddenly, he was spinning counter-clockwise in mid-air, very fast, his ribs aching, his fingers slipping from the handle, and the world just a blur. He made a concerted effort to hold fast and then jerked the handle up sharply, shooting into the sky above the parapets, breathing quickly, his head still spinning. Each breath felt like he was being stabbed in the chest.

The other players were showing no mercy. *I'll either get onto the team or die trying*, he thought.

He decided that perhaps Jean-Claude had had a good idea to pick another player and tail him. He would keep moving that way, instead of being virtually a stationary target. And, Harry hoped, perhaps the more he moved around the better his chances of seeing the Snitch again. He looked down at the flurry beneath him for a moment before choosing to latch onto a witch in red, barreling toward the Green Keeper with the Quaffle. Her reddish-brown hair streamed out behind her and she looked alarmed when she turned around and saw him on her tail. As he flew he watched the other Seekers. Neil was speeding crosswise across the field of play for some reason, but then he stopped and peered down. Harry looked down too, but there was no gold flutter down there. He turned to face forward again and almost plowed into the center goal hoop; he swerved just in time and decided that following a Chaser wasn't the best idea. He was about to go

after a Beater when the wizard who had dropped his bat before maneuvered his broom so that he could use the twigs to hit a Bludger at Neil, who was oblivious. If he didn't move, it would hit him in the back of the head.

Harry sped toward him, yelling, "Duck!" Neil either didn't hear him or disregarded him, Harry couldn't decide which. The Bludger was very close. Harry would never reach him in time. He tried something else. He pointed down and cried, "The Snitch!" going into a dive, hoping Neil would follow. He remembered the way Krum had executed the Wronski Feint at the World Cup, and he tried his best to approximate that now. His breathing was labored and his ribs were a constant dull ache. He looked over his shoulder and Neil was flying in his wake, the Bludger sailing harmlessly over his head. When Harry saw that, he breathed a sigh of relief and jerked his broom handle up again, climbing away from the ground once more.

"Just kidding", he called to Neil shakily. Neil scowled at him, evidently unaware that Harry had saved him from being concussed by a Bludger.

The Chasers on both teams were scoring repeatedly while the four Seekers continued to fly about and get bashed into occasionally. Harry decided to try marking Erica, as she was the one he reckoned he had to beat. She was rather annoyed about this and tried to shake him off. Then he noticed that Neil was marking Jean-Claude, and the French-Welsh wizard was just as annoyed about being followed as Erica.

Unfortunately, Erica and Harry were near the Red goal hoops and the other two Seekers were near the Green hoops when the Snitch was spotted about six feet off the ground near the Green end of the pitch. Harry turned and sped toward it as soon as he saw that bit of gold, but Neil and Jean-Claude were much closer, having gone into a dive, side by side, elbowing each other so badly that if fouls were being called, both would have been cited for *extreme* clobbering. Their fighting escalated to such a level that their locked bodies plowed right into the Snitch, sending it skittering toward the edge of the field. Finally, Jean-Claude, furious, gave Neil a vicious *push* that sent him hurtling off his broom. He had only fallen from about eight feet off the ground, and was probably not hurt, but Harry could see how disappointed he was.

He was on the ground. Neil was disqualified.

Harry continued to speed toward the Snitch in its new position; he glanced over his shoulder and saw Erica close behind. Jean-Claude was also heading toward it. Then suddenly a Bludger hit Harry's broom twigs and he wobbled off course, right in front of Erica, whose broom handle hit Harry in the left elbow so painfully he had to struggle with all his might not to let go of his own broom. Pain radiating up his arm, he looked in the vicinity where the Snitch had been, not seeing it. It was gone again.

Now it was just the three of them. Harry marked Erica and Jean-Claude marked him. Harry scanned the field for the Snitch, but saw nothing. The three of them wove around the other players in a strange sort of train.

"*You shall beat it.*"

"What?"

Sandy didn't repeat herself. But then Harry thought about her words. The Beater who had dropped his bat earlier was scowling at Harry and started flying straight at him. Harry took his broom straight up, only to find that a Bludger was heading directly for him. He halted immediately, letting the Bludger zip past. Scowling at the Beater, Harry looked down at the ground where the dropped bat lay. A thought lit up his brain, and he said, "Thanks, Sandy!"

"For what, Harry Potter?"

"For giving me an idea!"

He wondered if he could do what he needed to do. He put his hand out as he flew, concentrating hard. "*Accio bat!*" he cried.

The bat soared up toward him and leapt into his waiting hand, hitting Jean-Claude's broom twigs on the way; he shook his fist at Harry. When Harry had the bat in hand, he looked for one of the Bludgers and went flying after it. *If I can't catch the Snitch myself, I can at least make sure the other Seekers don't get attacked anymore*, he thought. He flew toward a Bludger that was flying straight at him and then swung back, grunting loudly, feeling a jolt move through him as he struck it, hearing the ringing sound of metal on metal as one of the iron bands on the bat hit the Bludger. It was as if someone had pushed all of his ribs into his lungs. He sent the orb hurtling toward the Beater who'd given them so much trouble; he looked shocked and he dove out of the way, glaring at Harry afterward through narrowed eyes. Harry narrowed his own eyes and glared right back, continuing to heft the bat in his right hand.

They were playing a different game now. Every time Harry thought he saw someone coming after one of the other Seekers, he hit a Bludger at the player in question. He didn't aim for the people so much as their brooms, to take them off-course. The other players were getting very annoyed with Harry. Harry was starting to think he might like to be a Beater.

Perhaps to make it more difficult for him to defend his fellow Seekers, the Red Chasers managed to separate Jean-Claude from Erica and one of the Green Chasers grabbed her broom tail and started pulling her toward their goal hoops. Harry scowled, looking around for Bludgers. One was rounding the Green goal hoops, so he sped there and hit it hard at the Green player harassing Erica, who swerved to avoid it. It went sailing harmlessly past him. Then Harry spotted the other Bludger, high above the center of the field. He flew upward and swung back hard with the bat, hitting it toward the Red Chasers who were surrounding Jean-Claude, making it impossible for him to choose where to fly. But as soon as Harry hit the Bludger, he saw a golden fluttering that had been hidden behind it. *Had it been marking the Bludger?* he wondered. *Could it do that — ?*

His breathing still enormously painful, he switched the bat to his left hand quickly, wrapping that hand around both bat and broom handle, and reached out and clutched at the tiny thing, hoping that he wasn't dreaming. Harry looked down at it in wonder, the tiny wings now fluttering vainly against his fingers and palm. He swallowed and looked up at the parapets, where many more people than he remembered were watching. He thought he also saw some indistinct figures in the stands, under the parapets. He was looking for Sirius, and when he found him, he saw that his godfather had been watching the other players. He grinned at him and held up his hand, trying to get his attention.

"I've got it!"

He thought the other players might be upset with him, but suddenly, realizing what had happened, all of them raced upward, thrilled smiles on their faces. Harry saw that Sirius was punching the air and yelling himself hoarse, his smile filling his face, and soon Harry was surrounded in the air by the members of the Welsh national team, being patted on the back while they said things like, "Good show, Potter!" and "Did you do that Summoning Charm without a wand?" and "Never seen the Seeker take over for one of the Beaters! And you still got the Snitch!"

Harry was smiling so much his face hurt. And then his breath caught as the injury to his ribs made his breathing difficult again, and he sailed up above the parapets, then landed near Sirius, collapsing with exhaustion. Owen Aberystwyth strode over to him, helping him to his feet, taking both the Snitch and the bat from him. By now Harry could barely draw breath. He felt like he was living in a dream. Owen put out his hand and shook Harry's, saying, "Congratulations, Harry. You're on the team." Harry nodded dumbly, his powers of speech having left him. When Sirius came forward and hugged him enthusiastically, his speech returned in the form of a pained howl.

"What's wrong, Harry?"

"I — I think I have some broken ribs. Madam Pomfrey can take care of it."

"Not right away she can't. You need immediate attention. We'll take you down to the team doctor. How long were you playing like that?"

"Dunno. It happened pretty early." He looked up and saw that Owen was looking more pleased than ever, that he'd continued playing while injured. Erica had landed nearby and she walked up to Harry now, her hand out.

"Congratulations", she said, just a touch of disappointment in her voice. "I suppose this means I'm the reserve Seeker now." The meaning of her words washed over Harry. He wasn't a reserve. He was a *starter*. He remembered Owen's words now about what would happen if Erica didn't catch the Snitch first. To his surprise, Owen put his arm around Erica and gave her a hug. *Is that usual?* Harry wondered.

"Oh, come on, love. You know you're always a starter to me in other ways..." He was grinning at her and she colored, before they walked off, their arms around each other. "I'll be in touch about practices, Harry!" Owen called over his shoulder. Harry tried to close his mouth so that he wouldn't look completely stupid. He turned to Sirius.

"What the —"

"Oh, you didn't know?"

"That they're seeing each other? No, I didn't. I can't believe he's replacing her! And she's not hacked off at him, or threatening to break up with him..."

Sirius laughed and clapped Harry on the shoulder. "No, it's more than that." He looked after the retreating pair, grinning. "She's not just his

girlfriend, Harry."

Harry frowned. "Then what?"

Sirius smiled even more broadly and said, "Erica's *his wife*."

* * *

After Harry saw the team physician about his ribs, he felt much better. The boneset was under bandages wrapped around his torso, mending the broken bones, and the painkiller potion he took made him feel rather like he was at the dentist, but the dentist had numbed his torso instead of his gums. He felt odd and awkward, but no longer in pain.

Since the Portkey wasn't going to activate again until the late afternoon — just in case the try-outs took all day — they needed to kill time. They walked over the rolling green hills to the village, carrying their brooms. When the houses came in sight, they tucked the brooms, their robes and most of Harry's other Quidditch gear under a tall hedge that was dividing two paddocks, dotted with sheep ranging from dirty cream to dun-colored. Harry's trousers and Quidditch sweater would pass muster in a Muggle pub, so Sirius didn't need to Transfigure his clothes. Sirius was already wearing black jeans, shirt and boots.

"I wish I had my old bike", he said wistfully as they walked, avoiding piles left by the sheep.

"Did I ever tell you I had dreams about a flying motorcycle?" Harry asked him, remembering how irate his uncle had been about Harry mentioning this. Sirius laughed.

"No, you never said..."

"Why did you bring your broom, anyway?"

Sirius hesitated. "It was just a precaution."

"A precaution? What were you going to do, fly onto the pitch?"

Sirius frowned. "Never mind. Let's just go to the village..."

Then something black flickered just out of Harry's range of vision; he turned and saw an Auror walking half a field behind them. *More precautions*, Harry thought. Sirius turned to see what he had noticed; he grimaced.

"Stupid things", he said in an undertone. "I know they're supposed to keep an eye on you, but we're almost in the village and they're still wearing their robes..." He sounded like he thought they might also be along to keep an eye on *him*.

He waved to them and they stopped, looking alarmed. He picked up the fabric of his sleeve and held it away from his arm, pantomiming. They looked puzzled, so he finally cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted at them, "*Ditch the bloody robes!*"

Understanding dawned on them then, and they removed the robes, carrying them over their arms like overcoats. One of the Aurors was wearing white tie and tails; the other man, a tweedy jacket over a shocking pink woman's blouse and orange plaid trousers. Sirius rolled his eyes.

"When are they going to give those blokes training in how to dress like real Muggles?" he muttered to Harry, shaking his head. They turned and continued walking toward the village.

While they ate their lunch in a corner booth in the pub, the Aurors sat at the bar, several stools apart, as though they weren't together. Harry and Sirius chuckled as they ate their fish and chips, observing the wizards' fascination with the television over the bar, which was showing an advert for toothpaste during a break from an American comedy. *Well*, Harry thought, *at least we don't have to worry about being the conspicuous ones.*

Harry stiffened, however, when he heard the publican say to the Auror in the formal attire, "Late for a wedding, are you?" The Auror looked down at his clothes, then back up at the publican behind the bar.

"Er, not exactly. Um, it was supposed to be me. She changed her mind."

Everyone in the pub, except for the other Auror, Harry and Sirius immediately started commiserating with the jilted "groom" and started telling stories of other couples who hadn't quite made it to the end of the wedding ceremony — or even the beginning. The Auror looked stunned to be the center of attention, and his partner scowled, obviously upset that they weren't blending seamlessly (although Harry thought they could have dressed more carefully if that were the goal). Harry and Sirius were having difficulty eating and drinking while stifling their laughter.

As he ate, he thought, *It's been a good day.* He hoped Ron's was going as well...

* * *

"I made the team!" they said simultaneously when they saw each other.

"You made the team, too?" they both responded.

Hermione was looking like it was very hard *not* to jump around at this news. Harry frowned at her. "I thought you were afraid I'd be too much of

a target if I did this."

"You told me all about the Aurors that were there. It sounds like you were be perfectly safe."

"Yeah, well, there were these two..." He told them about going to the village with Sirius. Ron didn't laugh when Harry described their clothes. Hermione did.

"I don't get it", Ron said, his face blank. Hermione rolled her eyes and set about explaining it to him, while Harry's eyes wandered to Ginny, sitting by the common room fire, reading. He wanted her to be happy for him, but instead she seemed to be studiously ignoring him, turning pages slowly. He turned away; it hurt too much to be so close to her and yet a million miles apart.

After dinner, Ron and Harry described their trials for the other Gryffindors in the common room. Dean and Seamus were screaming with excitement when he told them about hitting the Bludgers. Ron's tryout was equally harrowing, but he'd passed each test with flying colors. Part of the time he had to specifically only *help* another Chaser score, no matter how tempting it was to try to score himself. That was the hardest part, for Ron.

"And were they trying to knock you off your broom, too?" Harry asked him.

"Yeah. When the first bloke ran into me, he didn't know what hit *him*", Ron grinned.

It seemed that it was nine o'clock in no time, and suddenly Draco Malfoy was standing by his elbow. *In the Gryffindor common room.* When Harry spotted him, he cried out in surprise.

"Malfoy! What the hell are you doing here?"

Draco Malfoy crossed his arms and glared at Harry. "I could ask you the same thing, Potter. We're supposed to patrol now. You switched with Perugia, remember?"

"But how did you get in here?"

"I went to McGonagall. She used the password to open that portrait hole you lot use as a doorway, then let me come in. Oh, don't look so worried; she wouldn't let me stand close enough to hear what your bloody password is..."

Harry grimaced. "Hang on. We can leave in a minute."

He still hadn't changed his clothes; now he switched to running clothes which were immediately obscured by his school robes. *At least I'll be*

comfortable. He adjusted his Head Boy badge on his breast and put the Marauders' Map and his wand in his pocket. Malfoy nodded when he returned to the common room, and they left without speaking. Harry glanced over his shoulder at Ron and Hermione, who shrugged.

Professor McGonagall was waiting in the corridor, looking at Harry very disapprovingly. "I know that you worked hard today, Potter, and I appreciate that you are excited about your new job. But you still have duties to perform as a school prefect. Punctuality is expected for all patrollers. Staff as well as students, as I had occasion to tell Professor Snape last night. Keeping me waiting... *Two in the morning...*" she muttered darkly as she strode ahead of them. Harry wondered if the delay had anything to do with Maggie, and he looked at Malfoy with his eyebrows raised. Malfoy scowled at him.

"So, Professor McGonagall", Harry said, trying to converse with his head-of-house instead. "Are you patrolling tonight, as well?"

She turned and looked at him very sternly again. "Not the first shift. I would also be late if that were the case. I am doing the second shift. At the moment, I am merely returning to my office, where I was when Mr. Malfoy came looking for you. He was already in the entrance hall with Lewis, MacMillan, Professor Sprout and Professor Trelawney. At nine o'clock sharp. As you should have been. It is now —" she checked Harry's own watch, twisting his arm around slightly more than it was meant to. He tried not to wince. "— nine-twenty-five. As Head Boy you are expected to set an example. Don't let this happen again."

"Yes ma'am", he said meekly, before she turned and began walking down the corridor that led to her office. He saw that Malfoy was smirking now.

"Which way should we go?" he said, trying to ignore the insufferable expression on the blond boy's face.

"So", Malfoy drawled, ignoring the question. "Golden boy is on the Welsh team. Big surprise. Bet they couldn't wait to have Potty, hero of the wizarding world. Pity you'll just be a reserve. Won't actually get to play. But they can still say you're on the team..."

Harry felt the anger surging up in him and was helpless to stop it. "For your information, the tryout was very rough, and I won fairly. And I'm not a reserve player."

Malfoy's jaw dropped. "Good lord, they're so desperate they made you a starter?"

"They didn't —" he started to say, but bit his tongue. "Let's just patrol, shall we Malfoy? We have a job to do for the next two hours. Let's just do it and try not to get on each other's nerves too much, all right?"

Malfoy shrugged. "You're not getting on my nerves. I've just learned to accept that no one in the wizarding world actually expects *you* to be *qualified* for anything. You just get whatever you want regardless..."

Harry stopped in front of him, bellowing in his face. "That's a lie! And even if it *were* true, how is that different from you having gotten everything you wanted your whole life because of your father? Talk about not earning anything! I worked damn hard to get on that team, and —"

"*Halt!*" screamed a familiar voice. Harry looked up in surprise to see Ernie MacMillan and Trixie Lewis, a Ravenclaw sixth-year, come barreling round the corner, their wands drawn, their faces very white. When he saw it was Harry and Malfoy, Ernie lowered his wand. "Oh, it's you. Just scare the shit out of us, while you're at it, Harry! Hell's bells. Whatchoo have to be shouting all over the place for?"

Harry reddened. "Sorry, Ernie. Just a simple *difference of opinion*." He glared at Malfoy.

"Well it's a damn noisy one. You're lucky Sprout and Trelawney didn't come running too."

Malfoy guffawed. "As if Sprout *could* run anywhere. She's so dumpy —"

But this wasn't the right thing to say to Ernie, who pointed his wand at Malfoy now. "You take that back! That's my head-of-house you're talking about! I'd rather have *her* for my head-of-house than that excuse for a teacher *you've* got!"

"That's enough!" Harry said to Ernie, coming between him and Malfoy, who had also drawn his wand now. He turned to Ernie. "I don't want to hear one more word about Professor Snape, do you hear? He's risked his life doing Dumbledore's bidding more times than *you* have, I'll warrant. And *you!*" he said, turning to Malfoy. "Now that you can't insult Ginny's mother any more, you've moved on to Sprout?" He looked back and forth between the two boys. "I'm at fault here too, but I say this stops now. We're all supposed to be patrolling the corridors, not creating trouble in them. I don't want to hear one more disparaging word about a teacher or staff

member or the person who says it will lose twenty points for their house. Is that clear?" Ernie and Trixie nodded; Malfoy drew his mouth into a line and gave a smaller nod. "Now", Harry went on, "Malfoy and I will take this corridor; you two go up a flight and do there. And remember, we need to meet the next shift in the entrance hall at eleven-thirty and report any unusual findings. Any questions?"

He knew there wouldn't be. The four of them moved off in their two different directions and it was relatively peaceful for the rest of the shift. Harry tried not to leap to the bait when Malfoy said things designed to set him off, and he also tried not to set Malfoy off. Sometimes it was very difficult.

When eleven-thirty finally arrived, they were descending the marble stairs into the entrance hall, where the new patrollers were waiting. Professor McGonagall was talking in low tones to Professor Sinistra and Mariah Kirkner was eyeing the other students, who were all fifth-years, somewhat suspiciously. Harry was still getting to know the new prefects, and he remembered that the dark-haired boy was Harrison, a Hufflepuff, but he couldn't remember his first name. Robert Jensen, a Slytherin prefect, was also waiting, as well as Tamara Katz, a Ravenclaw.

When Mariah spotted Draco Malfoy, Harry saw a slow smile creep over her face that could only be described by calling it *lascivious*. He glanced at Malfoy, who was responding with a similar smile. Professors McGonagall and Sinistra were oblivious. Harry watched the two Slytherins carefully.

A few moments later, Ernie and Trixie appeared, as well as Professors Sprout and Trelawney, who gave Harry a very wide-eyed look, as though alarmed.

"Thank you, all", McGonagall said to the first shift. "We'll take over now. Students — go straight to your houses, no dawdling in the corridors. Will you be going to your quarters, Professors?" she asked Sprout and Trelawney.

"I'm turning in, Minerva", Sprout said, using a grubby hand to cover her yawn. "I'm up early and down in the greenhouses, you know..."

"I — I shall be returning to my tower", Trelawney said mistily, looking at Harry through her enormous, thick spectacles. "I suddenly feel moved to see whether I can find anything in my crystal ball that is of interest. I strongly suspect that I shall..." Her eyes were still on him. Harry tried to

keep a blank expression on his face, although it was very, very hard not to scowl. Plus, if he said what he thought of her, he'd have to take twenty house points from himself.

As he was starting to ascend the stairs again, he thought he heard Mariah's low voice say to Malfoy, "*See you in the common room later.*"

He froze for a moment, then resumed climbing the stairs. He felt the Marauders' Map crinkling in his robe pocket and thought about what he'd do if the map showed Malfoy and Mariah together in their common room. Would Ginny care? She was still very angry with him. He just wished Malfoy would break up with Ginny if he wanted to be with Mariah. But he seemed determined to keep Ginny unavailable, a prisoner of his so-called love. Harry sighed and resumed moving upward.

He didn't tell Ron or Hermione about what he'd heard Mariah say when he returned to the Gryffindor common room. He went up to bed, even though most of the other students in the common room would probably still be up for hours, as it was Saturday night. He'd had an exhausting day. Still — if he could bring himself to wake up at two in the morning to look at the map —

As he set his clock for two in the morning, he glanced over at Neville's bed; Neville was sitting against his pillows, still fully clothed, reading an Herbology text. Harry didn't recognize it. The title was *Creating Hybrids with Magical Herbs Without Running Afoul of the Law* by Belladonna Fernrock.

"That looks rather advanced", Harry said to Neville as he removed his robes.

Neville looked up, a very strange expression on his face. Harry had the urge to reach for his wand suddenly, for he had a very bad feeling that this wasn't Neville at all, but an impostor. The feeling was much stronger than it had been with Sirius, when they'd arrived in Wales for the tryouts. For six years, Neville's face had had the look of someone who was never quite sure that he was where he belonged. There was something missing from his features, an assurance that he knew his place in the universe and was in it. His expression had previously appeared to be thrown together haphazardly and seemed to have the potential to dissolve if a reprimand from McGonagall or Snape was too sharp.

Now his features were knit together by a calm surety; there was a *cohesiveness* to Neville's countenance, a maturity, that Harry had never

seen before. He realized that he hadn't really spent much time with Neville since the term had started (there were so many students in the seventh-year classes it was hard to keep track of what everyone was doing), and now he was shocked by the change that had come over his dormmate. Harry looked at him with narrowed eyes. The last time Neville had looked markedly changed he had become addicted to two dangerous potions.

"It is", Neville said in response to Harry's statement about the book. His voice was deep and even, his face had thinned out and had a slight bit of growth on it, as it was late at night. Harry realized for the first time that Neville was no longer a little boy. It was very, very difficult to accept Neville as a man, but that was clearly what he was now.

"Er, okay", Harry said uncertainly. Neville had always taken to Herbology more than any other class, and Harry reckoned he would do something in the field once out of school. He said goodnight to Neville but received no response before he pulled his hangings closed around his bed.

* * *

On Monday morning, Ron gave Hermione her birthday present at breakfast. Ron hadn't suggested giving her a joint gift this year, as he was now Hermione's boyfriend. She opened a small hinged box at the Gryffindor table, only to shut it again immediately, blushing deeply. She turned to Ron, looking very much like she wanted to kiss him, but she settled for leaning close to him and whispering in his ear, and then *he* was the one blushing.

After lunch, Ron waylaid Hermione on the front steps of the castle and kissed her on the cheek before she left for Hogsmeade for their Apparition lesson. Sirius waited indulgently, grinning at Ron, before kicking off, shooting into the air. Harry watched Hermione kick off and he followed, along with the other students. When the village hall was in sight, they set down in the street and waited for Sirius to unlock the heavy front doors with his key, followed by his muttering a countercharm to break the locking charm that was also on the door. Once inside, they settled themselves in the front row of seats and Sirius paced before them, trying to look stern, but somehow managing to look very avuncular instead.

"All right! We had a good first week. Not much Apparition happening yet, obviously, but I need to make certain that you all understand the *limitations* of Apparition before you attempt to do it yourself. Apparition can be very, very dangerous. Now, I know I spent a great deal of time

telling you splinching stories last week, and yes, some of them can be rather amusing —" He winked at Harry, who tried not to laugh at the memory of some of the stories. "— but you've got to know about the consequences of Apparating for frivolous reasons or when you're in the wrong frame of mind for whatever reason. The results are nothing to laugh at. So, before we get started — is everyone here?" He pulled a register out of his pocket and started scanning it, looking up at the assembled students repeatedly as he matched names with faces.

"Hmm", he said after a while. "Where is Lavender Brown?"

Parvati Patil raised her hand tentatively. "She decided she doesn't want to take the lessons, Professor Black. At least not right now. She said she'll decide after the autumn term whether she wants to do it."

Sirius nodded. "That's fine. And is Mr. Nott absent for the same reason?" he asked the Slytherins. They looked at each other, baffled, raising eyebrows and shrugging shoulders.

"I'll ask him when we're back at the castle", Millicent Bulstrode replied. As Malfoy already had his Apparition test, she was the only Slytherin prefect present.

"Right! So. Without looking at your notes", he said pointedly, causing several students to slam their copybooks shut guiltily, "who can tell me some of the basic rules concerning Apparition?"

Hermione raised her hand immediately, and Sirius didn't make her wait long. "Yes, Hermione?"

"Never Apparate or Disapparate where you can be seen by Muggles."

"Good", he said, beaming at her. "However — that rule has been in place for a very long time. It is no longer completely adequate. Or rather, there is a corollary which is unstated in the laws concerning Apparition, but which you must all consider carefully as you determine whether a particular location is Apparition-safe. Who remembers the corollary?"

Hermione's hand shot up again, and Sirius smiled warmly at her. His words, however, were at odds with his expression. "Now, Hermione. Give others a chance. Yours is not the only memory I would like to test." It was a gentle reprimand, but it was a reprimand nonetheless, and Harry saw that her face was clouded as she slowly lowered her arm.

"Yes, Dean?" Sirius said, looking past her.

"Never Apparate or Disapparate where you can be seen by Muggles or be recorded by Muggle devices."

"That's right. Five points for Gryffindor. Just because no *people* are present does not mean that a location is safe. Muggles have security cameras everywhere these days. What were formerly nice, deserted corners of the Muggle world, places witches and wizards could usually count on to use for Apparating and Disapparating without problems, have become carefully-monitored potential crime scenes, places that are judged to be dangerous by dint of their isolation. Which is exactly what we need to be *safe* when Apparating — isolation. Muggles, however, view these locations as dangerous because criminals can lurk there and surprise unwary people. It's becoming very, very difficult to find good Apparition points other than wizarding homes or businesses. One can't be too careful. It is of utmost importance that you do not find yourself being filmed while doing magic. In fact, it's even more difficult a problem to fix than a Muggle seeing you. One person can be taken care of with a memory charm. A *camera*, on the other hand, may be broadcasting a signal to a machine which is filming the view through the lens from many miles away. It could be very difficult to track down that machine and destroy the evidence."

He looked grimly at them all. "Now then — who can remember something else I said about *who* can and cannot Apparate?"

Blaise Zabini raised his hand. When Sirius acknowledged him, he said smugly, "Pregnant women can't do it." Harry thought of Fleur, walking up the drive at the Spinnet estate...

Sirius nodded but looked dissatisfied. "Yes — but. What is the *reason* for pregnant women not being able to Apparate? Oh, and five points for Slytherin", he added.

Parvati raised her hand now and he nodded at her. "Apparition only affects the person casting the spell, the clothing that person is wearing and the objects that person is carrying, and sym — sym —"

"Symbionts", Sirius prompted her.

"Symbionts of no more than a few cells in size." She frowned. "I have no idea what I just said."

Sirius laughed, his eyes crinkling up. He looked now like the handsome, laughing man in his parents' wedding photos. "You're just repeating what I said last week. I understand. Does anyone remember what a symbiont is?"

Hermione looked like she was considering raising her hand, but she crossed her arms instead, looking grumpy. Harry was sure she knew, but was trying to be contrary now. He raised his hand.

"Harry."

He lowered his hand and spoke. "A symbiont is another name for a parasite. Sort of. You said we have bacteria living in us that we have a symbolic —"

"*Symbiotic*."

"Er, right. We have a symbiotic relationship with them. It. Them. It. What I mean is — the bacteria help us digest food, and things like that. We don't lose them when we Apparate, even though they're actually, um, their own beings. I'm not sure how to say it. I was going to say independent —"

"— and yet they're not independent, are they?" Sirius finished for him. "They are quite dependent upon us. And we are dependent upon them. That is what *symbiotic* means. There is a relationship of mutual benefit and interdependence between us and our bacteria. These organisms are too small to be seen by the human eye. We knew they existed long before Muggles did, of course, because of magical methods of observing very small objects, and once they invented microscopes with which to see them, Muggles also learned that these organisms exist. We can also do some things that Muggles can't, medically, because we have spells and potions designed to influence these organisms, to do things at a microcosmic level to cure illnesses and repair injuries. Muggles can do a little along these lines, and they're learning more all the time, but they don't have Pepper-Up potion yet. They can't heal broken bones in about twenty-four hours.

"But tell me, what does all this have to do with why pregnant women cannot Apparate?"

Pansy raised her hand and he nodded at her. "Even when it's very small, a baby is too large to be affected by an Apparition spell cast by the mother. *And* you can't Apparate while carrying a small child or animal in your arms, either. Same reason."

"Good point. Five points for Slytherin. That's right. A baby in its mother — even very soon after conception — a pet, another adult — trying to Apparate with any being like this leads to enormous complications. Now, it would be nice if the person casting the spell simply disappeared and the thing which cannot be moved using Apparition simply stayed in the original location. But that is not what happens. Some of the

worst splinchings in history have been as a result of people trying to do something as seemingly simple as Apparating while holding a cat..."

Harry shuddered, then remembered Hermione accidentally giving herself many of the attributes of a cat — including whiskers and a tail — for a number of weeks when they were in second year. Using Polyjuice Potion with a cat hair had had very unpredictable results. He had a feeling the results of trying to Apparate with a cat would be similar — or worse.

One of Pansy's Slytherin girlfriends raised her hand. "But then why aren't we nekkid when we Apparate somewhere else? Why do our clothes go with us?"

Many of the boys started whistling and making catcalls. Sirius scowled. "Do I need to start giving out detentions?" he said very loudly, his voice echoing in the hall. The boys stopped, looking abashed. Dean had had his fingers in his mouth (having produced a very loud whistle using this method); he removed them quickly and then sat on his hand.

"Miss — er — Tobin asked an excellent question. Does anyone know the answer?" Hermione raised her hand timidly, and Sirius nodded at her. "Can you help us out, Hermione?"

"The clothes aren't alive. Just about every kind of clothing you can think of that isn't synthetic is made from things that *were* alive at one time: linen comes from flax and cotton from cotton plants, wool from sheep and silk from silkworms. But the materials are no *longer* alive. They don't have a life force. They're static."

"Five points for Gryffindor! Very good. Yes, good way to put it. They're static. For the most part. As they are no longer alive, they *are* subject to the ravages of time and will decay and break down, but this sort of change should not be confused with the sort of change that occurs in living, growing creatures. So then —"

"But I'm confused about something", Hermione went on, interrupting Sirius. He didn't complain.

"Yes?"

"Well, what happens if you Apparate with a plant? You know, what if you want to take your aunt a nice geranium from your greenhouse. What happens if you Apparate while carrying the flower pot with the geranium in it?"

Sirius stopped suddenly and stared. After a moment, he shook himself and said. "Well, it seems that Hermione has given us our first project.

Now, before you research this, I want you all to *theorize*. That means I do *not* want you to look it up in the library. Use what you know already and tell me what you *think* might happen. You may cite references to support your hypotheses. Developing hypotheses in this manner will come in handy as you continue in your Charms studies. Later in the year you will be working on *creating* new charms, and you have to learn how to project the likely outcome of a new and untried piece of magic. So! That is your assignment for next Monday: write a two-foot essay outlining what you think would happen if someone Apparated while holding a live geranium. And think about whether the size of the plant would make a difference." He looked round at them all. "Is anyone writing this down?"

The students scrambled to pull out their quills. Harry gave Sirius a small smile as he wrote. He had the feeling that Hermione had reached the limit of his knowledge and that he needed to do more research, but he thought that Sirius had recovered well, giving the class a writing assignment to give him time to get up to speed on the papers that might have been published about Apparating with plants.

"So. You all will answer that question in your essays. Moving on — I am looking for someone to tell me who else cannot Apparate..."

* * *

That evening after dinner, Ron reported to the Potions dungeon. Harry and Hermione went with him. He left them in the classroom, however, and stepped forward alone to knock on Snape's office door.

"Come", was the terse reply. Ron turned the knob and entered. A steaming goblet was already waiting for him on the desk, Harry saw through the doorway. "Drink it all, Weasley", Snape said quietly. Harry wasn't sure, but he almost sounded sympathetic, and for the first time Harry wondered what Porphyry Potion was like.

Ron nodded and picked up the goblet; he was standing sideways to Harry and Hermione, who could see Ron grimacing even as his Adam's apple bobbed repeatedly. Ron drained the goblet and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then put it back on the desk.

"Has Remus had his yet?" he asked quietly. Snape nodded.

"He flew to the castle from Hogsmeade after the last class and he has left again. He is working this evening." Hearing this, Harry realized that Remus must have gone back to his old job as a night watchman at the warehouse.

Ron closed the door behind him as he left and didn't look at Harry or Hermione. Hermione tried to put her arm around him as they walked, but he squirmed out of her embrace and sped up, walking ahead of them, alone. Harry shook his head at Hermione, then saw that she had tears in her eyes. He sighed and reached out for her hand; she took it and he squeezed it sympathetically, feeling her do the same in return. They walked behind Ron like that, holding hands. Harry watched Ron's back as he loped before them; his shoulders seemed to be bearing more than was fair for a seventeen-year-old boy, even if that boy was also a werewolf.

Ron wasn't especially sociable in the common room that evening, even though it was Hermione's birthday. He went up to bed early without kissing Hermione good night. Harry had noticed that he was particularly moody starting the week before the full moon, and he wished Ron's first instinct wasn't to shut them out at that time. He kept Hermione company in the common room for a little while longer, until she claimed she was tired and wanted to sleep. He kissed her on the forehead and wished her a happy birthday, catching Ginny's eye. He missed her so much it was like an ache; he hadn't even been able to spend time with her the previous evening, when he was supposed to patrol with her, as she'd swapped with Hermione and taken the first shift instead of second.

When they reached the entrance hall the next morning, Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner were not there to meet them as usual. Ginny shrugged and said listlessly, "They were doing the third shift last night. I meant this morning. They wouldn't have been done until four-thirty. They probably slept in."

Harry watched her face as she said this; her inflection was flat and toneless and she was starting to worry him; he didn't want her wasting away, as she'd done in her other life. He wished he had managed to wake up at two in the morning and check the map the previous Saturday night; in the morning, Neville had informed him that he had slept straight through the alarm, he was so tired. Neville had had to stumble across the room to get it to stop making noise, as Harry wasn't showing any signs of waking up and turning it off.

At breakfast Ginny just picked at her food. A pall seemed to be cast over everything, to Harry. Even receiving a letter from Owen about the first team practice didn't make him feel differently.

During Double Divination, after lunch, Ron's mood was worse than ever. Trelawney, of course, wasn't helping. She kept talking about his "melancholy aspect" and how the fate he had suffered (being bitten by a werewolf) was "surely seen in the stars."

"If it was bloody well seen in the stars", he grouched quietly to Harry, "it would have been nice for her to say something to me. Even if I couldn't have stopped it, I'd have *known*."

Maggie was not present, as she was attending classes herself at that hour. Harry thought he might try to talk to her later, to see whether she could talk to Ron. They got on well; having an older sister seemed to agree with Ron. He took her advice about most things far more seriously than when it came from Bill or Charlie (or, especially, Percy).

On Wednesday Harry was supposed to do the fourth patrol with Malfoy again, but found that the Slytherin had swapped with a Ravenclaw named Dorian who had been trying to get out of the third shift on Tuesday. Arnold Dorian was a sixth year who looked more like a second year, at best. He seemed to be very sharp but talked a bit too much for Harry's taste. He reminded Harry of what Colin Creevey would be like if he swallowed a dictionary, the Standard Books of Spells for all seven years and *Hogwarts, A History*, just for good measure. Harry almost missed Malfoy.

After lunch on Friday, they had Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures. Professor Sprout looked very harried when they arrived.

"All right, everyone. I know you are seventh years, but I'm afraid I won't be teaching you anything new today. I'm putting you all to work. This is something you all know how to do. We're going to be repotting Mandrakes. There are one hundred plants, so each of you will be repotting at least five, but if you get six or seven done, you will receive ten house points..."

"One hundred Mandrakes!" Seamus Finnigan burst out.

"Yes, one hundred. There were two hundred, but the sixth year Ravenclaws and Slytherins helped me with those. Now then — the earmuffs are over here. You know what to do. Don't dawdle! The headmaster wants a constant supply of Mandrake Draughts available in the school apothecary this year. I agree with him; we can't take any chances..."

Harry wondered whether there were threats Dumbledore hadn't revealed to him, threats that explained the need for so many Mandrakes.

He retrieved a pair of earmuffs and found a worktable to use. Ron and Hermione were working together, and he saw that Ron seemed to be acting a little more naturally around her again. Sunday would be a different story, however; Harry knew Ron was planning to stay holed up in the Shrieking Shack all day and night. Dumbledore had given him permission (and he'd had it rebuilt). On the eve of the full moon, Ron didn't want to take any chances.

Harry was partnered with Justin Finch-Fletchley. They didn't need to put on their earmuffs right away, so they were able to talk. They stood in a queue to get terra cotta pots, and Harry said to him, "So. How was your holiday, Justin?"

Justin frowned. "I've had better."

Harry swallowed while the awkward silence stretched on and on. Finally, they reached the front of the queue and each of them took five pots and returned to their work stations. They donned their gardening gloves (the soft cloth ones that were adequate for plants whose touch wasn't lethal) and pulled out the bin under the table which held the potting soil. Justin started shoveling soil into a pot, but it just fell through the hole in the bottom. He swore, something Harry had never heard Justin do. He looked inordinately angry.

"Forgot the sherds", he said tersely.

"I'll get them", Harry said quickly. He went back to the benches along the back of the greenhouse, where there was a bin containing fragments of broken pots. He scooped up a bunch with his gloved hands to protect him and carried the broken bits back to where Justin was staring into space. *Why does everyone seem so changed now that we're in seventh year?* he wondered, glancing at Neville briefly when he passed him on the way back.

While they were placing pot sherds in the bottoms of their pots and adding potting soil, Harry thought he'd give a conversation one more try.

"How's Liam?" he asked innocently. Justin raised blazing eyes to his.

"Liam!" he spat. Harry guessed this was the worst possible thing to say, but it was too late now. "Oh, he's fine as long as he can shag any bloke he wants. That's how *Liam* is."

Harry shoveled the potting soil into his pots and grimaced. After a few moments of silence, he thought Justin was done, but then he started up again.

"I *told* him over and over that it wasn't his fault. But would he believe me? No; instead he had to start going to Muggle pubs, drinking too much and looking for any bloke who'd have him..."

Harry frowned. "What wasn't his fault?"

"Niamh, of course." Justin sighed and looked very tired now. He stopped shoveling soil and just stood with his trowel in the air, appearing very forlorn. "We had gone out the night before. I had my seventeenth birthday last November and learned to drive during the Christmas holidays. My mum gave me my very own car when I returned home in June. Convertible VW Golf. Not new, but still rather nice. Fantastic for driving along country roads with the top down..." Suddenly, Justin had gone from not talking in anything but brief, terse sentences to emitting a stream of information.

"Liam was supposed to go to Diagon Alley with his sisters the next morning. I dropped him off at a wizarding pub several miles from my house and he Flooed home from there. We were very late, and he was knackered in the morning. Orla said she tried to wake him up and once she could tell he was actually breathing she reckoned he was too tired for shopping and let him sleep. After — after Niamh died, he kept insisting that it was *his* fault. That if he'd been there, he could have saved her, or died in her place..."

"All right! Is everybody ready for their earmuffs?" Professor Sprout said loudly from the front of the greenhouse. No one in the place could afford to not have their ears protected once people started pulling Mandrakes from their pots. Justin had to stop talking now, to Harry's relief. He'd forgotten all about Niamh dying in the Diagon Alley attack. And somehow, Liam had convinced himself that his sister's death was his fault, and he was drowning his sorrows in too much drink and too many strangers and pushing away Justin, whom Harry thought he loved...

When she ascertained that everyone's ears were covered, they began moving their Mandrakes from the old pots and putting them in the new. Harry was rather surprised to find that he had plants that ranged anywhere from infancy to adolescence. Why were they in so many different stages of development? he wondered. And then he wondered again why Dumbledore had been so adamant about the Mandrake Draught supply.

Professor Sprout checked on everyone's repotting and then gave the signal for them to remove their earmuffs. Harry shook his head afterward;

it was good to hear things again. The students bustled about, cleaning up, and Harry managed to say to Justin.

"I'm — I'm sorry about Liam, Justin. You seemed to be good together."

"I thought so, too", Justin replied with a resigned sigh as he wiped down their worktable with a cleaning flannel. "But I wish he understood my point of view. Niamh wasn't thrilled about our seeing each other at first. I thought she was upset about Liam having a boyfriend instead of a girlfriend, but it turned out that wasn't it at all. She was actually against us at first because I'm Muggle-born. They have relatives who are very rigid about purity of blood, all that rot. She finally came round, as Orla had fairly early, and then she was just grand, was Niamh. The four of us did a lot together. We even drove to Brighton earlier in the summer and spent several days. Fantastic weather. I mean — when I'd heard she'd died, I felt a bit like *I'd* lost a sister, too —" His voice had become thick and Harry saw that his eyes were shining. "Liam didn't care about anyone else's mourning. No one else mattered. The most important thing was for him to beat himself up about it, morning, noon and night." His voice was a whisper now, but it didn't seem to be so that people couldn't hear; Harry thought he might not have the strength to speak more loudly.

"I'm sorry", he said again, hearing how hollow a sentiment it was. But Justin finally smiled feebly.

"Thanks, Harry." He took off his gloves and put them away, hoisting his rucksack on his shoulder and preparing to walk back to the castle. Harry watched him go; somehow, Justin looked very alone. He wondered whether he should ask Remus Lupin to talk to Justin, but changed his mind. *Justin would probably just be hacked off if I did that.*

He turned and joined the other Gryffindors, who were walking down toward Hagrid's cabin for the Care of Magical Creatures class. Harry saw Neville walking by himself and caught up with him, hoping he could answer a question that was burning within him..

"Oi, Neville! Why do you suppose Sprout had us potting so many different sorts of Mandrakes? I mean, there were babies and toddlers —"

He stopped and smiled a strange new smile that Harry had never seen on Neville's face before. Hermione and Ron, who'd heard Harry's question, had been walking several feet behind Harry. They practically collided with him and Neville. Neville looked at all three of them, looking very — un-Neville-like.

"Can you three keep a secret?"

They looked at each other, wide-eyed, before nodding.

"I was staying at Professor Sprout's this summer. She has just a small cottage, but an enormous greenhouse. Dumbledore had her start the Mandrakes early in July. Trouble was, they would only have been two months old by the time the term started if they were just grown using normal methods. So he procured something from the Ministry that Sprout could use to speed up the growth, and asked her if there was anyone she could think of to help her. She thought of me", he said proudly.

Hermione frowned. "There's no way to speed up a Mandrake's growth, as far as I know. What did the headmaster get from the Ministry?"

He now looked like the cat that ate the cream. "Have you ever heard of — a Time Turner?"

The three looked at each other nervously, then at Neville.

"No, Neville", Hermione said innocently, while Harry tried not to laugh and Ron pressed his lips together and nudged her in the ribs. "What is it?"

Neville told them about it, and the fact that they had used it to prematurely age the plants by actually traveling back in time with them. The trouble was, he and Professor Sprout had to travel forward in time again with the plants, so they were aged-up a bit too.

"Technically, I should have celebrated my eighteenth birthday sometime in mid-August", he whispered as they drew nearer to Hagrid's. "And my nineteenth birthday should be around the end of the summer term. I'm glad I'm not doing it any more, though. Even though we were sticking to a schedule so that we ate proper meals and slept about six hours for every eighteen we were awake, I'm rather tired of living through six days every time the rest of the world goes through one. My summer hols literally lasted a year, for me. It feels like ages since I've been in school. Just hope I haven't forgotten everything. Except Herbology."

"No danger of that", Hermione said happily, seeing how well an extra year of maturity suited him. Having a clear purpose and duty seemed to suit him well too, Harry thought. He now understood the Neville he'd noticed in the dorm, reading; he *looked* like he'd grown up because he *had*. He was almost an entire year older than Harry, technically. It was odd to think this, since it was *Neville*, who constantly lost his toad and melted his cauldrons. *Neville growing up*. Well, Harry thought, remembering fixing

the timelines. *Stranger things have happened. Stranger things have certainly happened.*

* * *

Ginny managed to avoid patrolling with him again on Sunday night, and Harry took on extra shifts over the weekend so that he could spend Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday nights with Ron in his Animagus form. Hermione switched some shifts as well. Harry tried to distract her during the day on Sunday, as Ron was keeping away and Harry didn't feel it was his place to tell Hermione why. After their final class on Monday, Ron drank his last dose of Wolfsbane Potion, the three of them ate in the school kitchens, and then went down to the Whomping Willow together, accompanied by Sirius.

Harry put out his wand, touching the knot he knew would still the frantic branches. Sirius nodded at the three of them and they ducked down into the tunnel. They emerged in the rebuilt Shrieking Shack, sitting down together to wait for the sun to set.

Ron sat alone, a brooding cast to his features. Hermione and Harry were to one side, waiting. Finally, Harry couldn't take it any more.

"Oh, come on, Hermione. Just show me your Animagus form. Don't make we wait until moonrise..."

She grinned and glanced at Ron. "Should I, do you think?"

Ron shrugged. "Why not? This way you can explain it to him tonight, instead of making him wait for the morning."

"Oh, but it was going to be such *fun* to make him wait..."

"Hermione!" Harry pleaded. She laughed.

"All right. Now, Harry, keep an open mind..." She stood up. He nodded and waited. She took a deep breath and then —

Her paws touched down. Her nose had elongated into a snout and she had a slightly feathery tail. Her coat was a mix of grey and black, and her eyes glowed intelligently, her ears pricked up. Harry laughed.

"I don't believe it!" Then he stopped. "Wait a minute", he said, remembering something. "You started training to be an Animagus at the beginning of sixth year..."

She changed into her human form again and sat next to him, breathing with difficulty. "I know. That's why, once Professor McGonagall and I knew what form I was going to take, I was reluctant to tell you two. I was afraid you might think I was going to be a wolf because of Remus — who

was Professor Lupin to us at the time. I thought you would both accuse me of having a crush on a teacher again." Harry was surprised; she didn't usually like to admit to her Lockhart crush.

Harry was puzzled. "Then why —?"

"I did all kinds of research to find out what animals I identified with. I like cats, of course, but after being one temporarily in second year —" She shivered. "I didn't want to repeat that again, somehow. And then, in my research, I came across all of these articles in *Shaman Monthly* about North American shamans and wolves. The Clan of the Wolf is so revered, Harry, and it's in part because the wolf is regarded as a *teacher*. When I read that, something in me just clicked. I know you said I was a cellist in your other life, and when I was small I thought about being a doctor — but in recent years, more and more, I've come to think that what I really *feel* like, deep down, is a *teacher*."

Harry patted her hand. "Well, you were very good at teaching me Summoning Charms for the Tournament", he said, smiling.

She nodded. "Something about teaching just — just makes me feel completed. I've talked to Maggie about it a little, since her parents — I mean, her adoptive parents — were teachers, and she's a teacher. She talks about teaching as a *calling*, not a job. I know just how she feels! If I trained at St. Mungo's to be a doctor, it would never be more than a job to me. But *teaching*... Just look at some of our most dedicated teachers here at Hogwarts! Do you think they do it for the money? The more I read about the attributes of the wolf the more I knew that this was an animal I could bond with, that I could learn to become. I felt like the wolf chose me, not the other way around..."

Harry nodded. "That's how I felt about the griffin."

"Right! But then — well, when Remus bit Ron —" she looked at Ron sadly; "— I was no longer worried about you two thinking I was attracted to Remus. Instead, I felt like — like I *caused* Ron to become a werewolf. Which is stupid and superstitious and I should know better. I've said all of that to myself countless times, so you don't need to. But I still felt incredibly guilty. Remus finally talked me out of it, and talked me out of going to McGonagall to try to choose a different animal form. I know I wasn't supposed to tell others about my training, but he *was* a teacher at the time, and I couldn't think of anyone who would understand better what I was going through. He said that your dad", she said to Harry, "and Sirius

and even Pettigrew were the same way about choosing their animals. Started off thinking that it was their decision, and their animals choosing them sort of snuck up on them. He asked me why I chose a wolf and I told him. He asked me whether those things were still true after he bit Ron, about the wolf-as-teacher and so on. I said they were. Finally, he convinced me that it wasn't my fault he'd bitten Ron and that I should go ahead and stick with my wolf form, especially as I was almost done my training. So I did, and to my relief, when I showed Ron for the first time, he didn't throw a wobbly."

Harry smiled at her, but then he noticed that Ron was looking rather ragged around the edges. He nodded at her and changed into his griffin form. Hermione became a grey timber-wolf once more and a few moments later, Harry tensed up, as Ron was screaming in agony from his transformation. When it was finally over, he sank down onto the floor, resting his jaw on his front paws, looking very tired and dog-like, and not at all dangerous, thanks to the Wolfsbane Potion. Harry and Hermione flanked him and closed their eyes too. Harry felt his cat's motor rumbling through him and heard the peaceful snuffling of the wolves next to him. This was as it should be, he thought: the two of them were with Ron, keeping him from spending the night alone in a wooden shack with the wind whistling through the cracks. They'd been friends since they'd knocked out a mountain troll together and they weren't going to stop being friends now just because one of them was a werewolf.

Corridors

Harry looked down the track, but there was no puff of smoke to be seen. Beside him, Dumbledore pulled from his pocket something that appeared to be a watch, but which did not actually have hands and numbers. Harry looked at the whirling planets and felt perplexed, but when he raised his eyes to the headmaster's, he saw that the old man was shaking his head.

"Late again. It always seems to get bogged down in the Midlands. That's why we run an Express on September first, of course. I don't know why they don't change the timetables to reflect the true times, but then, they haven't changed the timetables in the last one-hundred and twenty-seven years, so they are unlikely to do it in the next five minutes, eh Harry?" he added, his eyes twinkling at the Head Boy.

"Er, right. Yeah. Nice watch, sir", he said, nodding at the instrument.

"Ah, yes. Thank you. Family heirloom." Dumbledore snapped it shut and returned the watch to his pocket and they continued to wait for the London-to-Hogsmeade train, the only ones on the long lonely stretch of platform at the edge of the village. Harry could see the castle across the enormous lake, windows flashing in the setting sun. He tried not to think about the fact that Hogwarts was much more his real home than Ascog, and that this sanctuary was now being invaded by one of the people he'd hoped to escape all of his life.

When he finally saw the smoke, he couldn't help feeling very uneasy. *Don't worry, he told himself. It will be fine. Maybe I won't even have to admit we're related...*

The train pulled into the station and slowed to a stop. Passengers began to emerge; it was the usual collection of rather *unusual*-looking people Harry had almost become accustomed to encountering in the wizarding world. Witches and wizards short and tall, wearing robes and a great variety of hats (tall, pointed and traditional; squashy top hats, bonnets, and so on) and carrying a variety of luggage or parcels (or levitating them).

Harry scanned the crowd, frowning. He didn't see her anywhere.

Finally, he heard the familiar sharp voice and jerked his head around.

"What does a person have to do to get some service around here? I need my things moved and that means *now*!"

Harry rushed to the train and peered into the doorway from which the voice was emanating. A conductor was standing in the corridor, looking exasperated. "We don't generally levitate things *for* people, ma'am, when they can do it themselves..."

"I tried, you ninny! But this thing —" she waved a slim, pale stick at the conductor, "isn't doing what I want it to do —" She pointed it at the door to the compartment and it started sliding back and forth rapidly and lethally, like a sideways guillotine.

"I think we can take it from here", the headmaster told the confused conductor. He moved unobtrusively past Harry and onto the train, then put his hand gently on Petunia Dursley's arm and said to her, "You don't need that right now, Mrs. Dursley. Just put it away and Harry will show you to the boat." Harry wasn't sure when she'd acquired the wand; it was possible Mrs. Figg had taken his aunt to Diagon Alley for it. He wished he'd been there to see *that*.

"Boat?" She perked up. "Where? Where? Oh, that sounds lovely", she started babbling at him as Harry led her off the train and toward the small dock. "We went on a lovely cruise last summer to —"

She stammered to a dead stop and stared at the tiny boat bobbing in the water. Harry climbed in, having some difficulty avoiding stepping on his robes. He stretched his hand out to her to help her board, but she didn't take the proffered hand. She simply stared open-mouthed at the fragile-looking vessel. She looked up at the castle across the lake, swallowing, and Harry remembered when he climbed into one of the small boats with Ron, Hermione and Neville six years earlier, gazing awestruck at the vision that was Hogwarts castle.

Dumbledore arrived at the edge of the dock, casually levitating Petunia Dursley's luggage with his wand, including a small dog carrier, from which irate yips were heard. Harry closed his eyes, grimacing. *Bloody hell*, he thought. *She's brought Dunkirk*.

His aunt whirled on the headmaster. "I am supposed to get into — into that *thing*?" she said disdainfully, pointing at the small craft. "There aren't even any oars!"

Dumbledore levitated the luggage — including Dunkirk's carrier — into a second boat bobbing nearby. "There is no need for oars, dear lady, but if they would be reassuring to you —" He waved his hand toward the boats and oars appeared for each one. There were no oarlocks holding

them in place, however; the oars merely hovered in position to begin rowing as though unseen persons were in fact holding them. He waved his hand toward the boat.

"After you, Mrs. Dursley. Harry, please assist your aunt."

Harry stood again, his legs a bit wobbly as the boat moved under him. He held out his hand to her once more. She still hesitated.

"Do I — do I *have* to?" she whined.

Harry felt an unexpected pang of sympathy for her, seeing her chin shake with fright. He didn't know whether she was asking if she had to get in the boat or whether she had to go to Hogwarts — perhaps she had changed her mind.

"I'm afraid so. All who are new to Hogwarts must cross the lake", the headmaster said smoothly.

She nodded, as if she understood something she hadn't before. "Ah, a rite of passage." Now that she had a label she could give to the trip across the lake, she climbed in gingerly, grasping Harry's hand painfully hard, and she was soon settled in the stern, sitting to one side so that the boat was listing rather severely. Once Dumbledore climbed in, the boat was on an even keel again. Harry sat in the prow, facing the castle. He turned to see what was surely one of the strangest sights the world had ever seen: Petunia Dursley, dressed like a witch, seated next to Albus Dumbledore in a tiny boat. Dumbledore waved his hands casually at the poised oars, and they began to move of their own accord, rowing both vessels across the glassy water.

Harry turned to face forward again, shivering as an unbidden memory of approaching Azkaban came to him. The water slapping on wood made his stomach clench, and he remembered the hollow, cold feeling he'd had inside as they'd dragged him to his cell... He shook himself and tried to clear his head, thinking about how clear and cool the night air was, and how beautiful the castle looked as they drew nearer to it.

At last, they reached the cave under the castle where the boats ran to ground. Harry climbed out first, getting his ankle-high boots a bit wet, and pulled their boat onto higher, drier ground, so that the headmaster and his aunt would not need to tread in the water.

Soon they were in the entrance hall, the luggage following behind. Mrs. Figg was waiting for them amid a flood of students streaming through to go into the Great Hall for the evening meal. Petunia Dursley

choked out an anguished yet relieved cry when she saw Mrs. Figg; Harry noted that, while his old baby sitter was wearing robes, she was wearing them open like an overcoat that hadn't been buttoned, and her Muggle clothes were visible underneath. She wore a nondescript skirt, blouse and cardigan such as Harry had always known her to wear while he was growing up in Surrey. This seemed to serve to comfort his aunt by dint of its familiarity. She also wasn't wearing a hat, he noticed.

"Arabella! It's so good to see a familiar face!"

Harry grimaced yet again. *What am I?* He noticed that some students passing by were looking at his aunt apprehensively, perhaps fearing another new teacher. Then Draco Malfoy emerged from the dungeons and Petunia noticed him immediately.

"Yoo-hoo! Draco! Hello!" She waved to him, her voice a wavering sing-song. A number of students turned to stare at Draco Malfoy, and he reddened. Harry grinned, glad that he had a perfectly legitimate excuse for being there (his status as Head Boy) other than his familial connection. Caught out, Draco Malfoy dutifully strode over to Petunia Dursley to greet her properly.

"Welcome to Hogwarts, Mrs. Dursley. How was your trip?" Harry realized that he hadn't officially welcomed his aunt, nor enquired about the trip. He tried not to feel irked at how *smooth* Draco Malfoy could be. He forced himself to remember that in his other life he'd actually admired this in his best friend.

She smiled at him the way she used to beam at Dudley. "Fine, except —" Now she looked uncertain. "A woman came round selling sweets. Luckily, she accepted *real* money in payment, but unfortunately she didn't seem to have any real *food* for me to buy. I tried these 'Chocolate Frogs', and they started leaping about the compartment! And then the, er", she paused, pulling something out of her pocket, "*Every Flavor Beans* were absolutely *vile*. They seem to have every flavor but *food* flavor." She held out the remainder to Draco, who put his hand up, politely declining to eat any. Just then, an excited yipping was heard from the dog carrier still floating nearby.

"Oh! Is that who I think it is?" Draco said, looking genuinely happy. He went on his knees to peer inside the small barred window in the door of the carrier. "Hello there, mate! Miss me, did you?" The yipping increased in volume and intensity. "Can I let him out?"

"Of course", Harry's aunt said as Dumbledore's mouth was just starting to form a word.

"*Actually...*" the headmaster started to say quietly, while Draco Malfoy flicked open the lock on the carrier. Dunkirk leapt out of the door and immediately jumped on Draco, licking his face and wagging his stumpy tail enthusiastically.

Just then, Harry noticed that Filch had entered the hall, followed closely by his eerie cat. Mrs. Norris stopped in mid-step, her luminous eyes focused on Dunkirk and nothing else. Harry felt an electric crackling in the air as the cat's back arched and its fur stood on end. Suddenly, Dunkirk lifted his head and saw the cat, recognizing his natural enemy, and a low growl was the only warning any of them received before he was off.

Harry had never known such mayhem. Mrs. Norris leapt from person to person, claws sinking deep into flesh, past layers of clothes, while Dunkirk snapped at the air and wove around the myriad legs keeping him from his quarry. More than one student (and a couple of teachers) tripped over him and fell, panicking, as everyone tried to avoid Mrs. Norris inserting those razor-sharp claws into their skin. Dean Thomas screamed shrilly (Harry thought it was his sister Jamaica at first) as the cat landed on his *head*, and Parvati started to take out her wand to help him, but wound up falling backwards over the terrier, looking like her both her bum and her dignity were injured as a result. Sparks flew from her wand and burnt Seamus Finnigan, who had been trying to duck behind a suit of armor. He promptly brought the shell of a knight crashing to the ground in a racket that echoed deafeningly around the entrance hall. And that was just what Harry could see going on near him; farther off in the crowd that had been attempting to enter the Great Hall, he heard more screams, saw more sparks above the sea of hats and heads, and heard more swearing than he usually encountered at a Quidditch match (some of it coming from teachers).

"Mrs. Norris!" Filch cried, genuinely concerned, and Harry remembered how distraught he had been when she'd been petrified by the basilisk. He leapt from person to person also (feet staying on the ground, for the most part) until, finally, the cat made a spectacular bound onto the marble banister, then onto the marble stairs themselves, streaking away up into the shadowy interior of the castle. Dunkirk, with his little legs, tried

to follow her up the stairs, but he wasn't designed for this and quickly fell far behind the cat; Mrs. Norris had vanished from sight.

"*Accio*", Dumbledore said calmly, deftly catching the little dog in his large, gnarled hands when he came flying at the old wizard. He petted him briefly, then bent over and reinserted Dunkirk into the carrier, closing the door with an air of finality. Harry noted that Dunkirk had not growled at the headmaster. Dumbledore turned to Petunia Dursley, still very calm, ignoring the bleeding casualties of Mrs. Norris' frantic flight. He nodded at her grimly, his mouth every bit as thin as Professor McGonagall's when she was displeased, and Harry was gratified to see that she looked momentarily as cowed as if she had received a scolding. Whimpering students were putting healing charms on each other, while others were skirting Harry, Dumbledore, Mrs. Figg and Petunia Dursley very cautiously, before bolting into the Great Hall.

"You and I will be sharing a suite of rooms, Petunia", Mrs. Figg told her, patting her arm. "There's a nice little grassy courtyard nearby where Dunkirk can run about and get some exercise while you're busy doing other things. You needn't worry about my cats, either, as my brother Alastor is caring for them. And I'm certain Draco would love to take him for walks on the grounds, when Dunkirk finds the courtyard confining."

Draco straightened up uncertainly at the mention of his name; Harry just realized he'd been cowering behind him while Mrs. Norris was leaping from person to person. The Slytherin was turning quite red.

"And", Dumbledore added to Mrs. Figg's comments, "when, er, Dunkirk is not in your rooms", he nodded at the two women, "he will remain on a lead in the castle and on the grounds. Understood?" He raised one eyebrow at Draco and Petunia. Draco nodded.

"Yes, Professor", he said deferentially, surprising Harry. Petunia Dursley pursed her lips and looked at Harry's Head Boy badge.

"Well! Perhaps the *Head Boy* can make himself *useful* and take my bags to my rooms..."

Harry bristled. Dumbledore had let the luggage drop during the cat-and-dog-chase, but Harry aimed his wand at each piece — including the dog carrier — and levitated it all again.

"Lead on, Arabella. Come along, Harry", his aunt said imperiously, waving her hand at Mrs. Figg, who turned with a frown and began to ascend the marble stairs with a very stiff, straight back, her robes clutched

in her hands so she wouldn't trip. Harry was still getting used to seeing her wear robes (even robes worn over Muggle clothes, as she was wearing this evening).

"Yes, Aunt Petunia", Harry muttered miserably. He saw now that his two best friends and Ginny were among the students who had not yet made it into the Great Hall. Hermione and Ron sent him sympathetic looks before they went into dinner. Harry caught Ginny's eye for a moment, feeling hopeful, but she turned slowly away and followed the other students in to dinner. He started moving the luggage up the stairs with his wand, trying not to notice how many other students were still thronging the entrance hall, even though a number had fled into the Great Hall. *So much for no one knowing we're related*, he thought.

He perked up his ears when they reached the tapestry that concealed the entrance to the staff wing; Mrs. Figg was explaining to his aunt that a password was required to gain admittance. Then he heard it: *palindrome*. That was the password.

"What did you say, Arabella?" his aunt said loudly. "Dromedary? Isn't that like a llama?"

"Camel. I did *not* say *dromedary*. Harry, tell her." She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Er, she said 'palindrome', Aunt Petunia", he said, reddening, realizing that Mrs. Figg could tell that he'd been trying to hear the word.

"Right! And you're not to *share* that information with anyone, understand, Harry? I think *you* should know, as you're Head Boy, but *no one else*."

"Not even Hermione?"

"Oh, well — yes, all right. As she's the Head Girl I suppose she should know as well. I'm sure Albus would agree."

They had to walk down more than a few corridors and make a number of turns even after entering the staff wing. When they finally reached their suite of rooms, Mrs. Figg took out a large key and unlocked the door. She waved her wand and suddenly, she was holding two keys, one of which she handed to Petunia Dursley. Harry moved the luggage into the bedroom that seemed to be unoccupied while Mrs. Figg lit a fire. His aunt let Dunkirk out of his carrier, cooing over him, sitting on the couch in front of the fire, while Dunkirk jumped up on his mistress' lap.

"*There's my widdle Dunky-wunky out of that nasty box...*" she crooned to him in a high-pitched sing-song voice.

Harry sat on a chair adjacent to the couch. He looked down at his hands, frowning. He wanted to ask her about so many things; whether she was in good health and rid of the cancer; how his uncle was dealing with her being a witch and coming to Hogwarts; when she bought a wand... But years of conditioning had taken their toll, and he found himself unable to utter these questions right after she had done such an unimaginable thing as coming to live at Hogwarts. He had been told quite often, when he was young, not to ask nosy questions. Once or twice, when his aunt or uncle was sick with a cold, he had even enquired after their health, but had that impulse drummed out of him by their hostile and suspicious responses. ("*Oh, we think we can have the run of the house while I'm laid up sick in bed, do we? Well, we'll just see about that...*") So much had changed, and yet — so much had remained the same. Despite Dudley having become his friend and his aunt going to Rodney Jeffries for help...

Rodney Jeffries. There; that was it. He could ask about Rodney Jeffries.

"Oh, by the way", he said, trying to sound casual. "Have you heard anything about Rodney Jeffries?" He had to bite his tongue to keep from saying that he'd been healed by Jeffries. He remembered the letter Jeffries had left him and wondered whether he had followed through.

She brightened up as though she had learnt of some extremely juicy gossip about her next-door neighbor. "Yes! It was in the *Times*. He's back and bigger than ever! He's had an audience with the queen. Scotland Yard has said that the nutters who wanted to investigate him have been thoroughly reprimanded, *and* next month he's appearing at the Royal Albert Hall! He's going to be traveling round the country — proper venues this time, mind you, no more tents — and the BBC is going to carry it all! Even the Archbishop of Canterbury himself has made a statement in support of what he's doing, as well as two medical societies!"

Harry's jaw dropped. "But — what about the Ministry? Aren't they after him for doing magic in front of Muggles?"

Mrs. Figg shrugged. "There was also a statement in the *Prophet* to the effect that he was just a Muggle charlatan, that there was no record of him in the wizarding world, and that if wizards and witches want to waste their time going to see him, that's not the Ministry's lookout."

"He's *not* a charlatan..." his aunt began, bristling.

"Witches and wizards are going to see him?" Harry asked Mrs. Figg.

"Harry, these days *everyone* is. I admit, I'm rather shocked by that in particular", Mrs. Figg said, shaking her head.

He also shook his head in disbelief. "You're not serious! And all of this has happened in the last six weeks? How is that possible?"

Aunt Petunia shrugged happily, petting Dunkirk. "With Rodney Jeffries, *anything* is possible. Why, if it weren't for him, I wouldn't be cancer-free!"

Harry opened his eyes wide in shock. "That's wonderful! Congratulations. But — what does Jeffries have to do with it?"

"If he hadn't turned me into a witch, I doubt that the visualization techniques Arabella taught me would have worked. On my last visit to the doctor, he said he couldn't find a trace of cancer. He called it a 'spontaneous idiopathic cure'."

He frowned. "What's that mean?"

Mrs. Figg sat in a chair opposite Harry. "A sudden unexplained cure. In other words, he hasn't got the foggiest idea what happened and he's probably worried that he misdiagnosed Petunia. Or someone else."

"Oh." Harry hoped the doctor didn't have a crisis of confidence over this. "Well, Uncle Vernon must have been glad to know you were cured."

His aunt pursed her lips again and let Dunkirk jump onto the floor. He went to the hearth rug and turned around three times, then curled up before the fire. "He — he'll be fine on his own for a while. Marge has moved in, to take care of him —"

Harry made a face. "*Aunt Marge?*"

"Well", his aunt said feebly; "Marge isn't so bad. She — just speaks her mind. There's nothing wrong with that."

"Right!" Mrs. Figg affirmed. She pulled out her wand, and, with a flick of the wrist, produced a tray with tea and crumpets. *She would agree with that*, Harry thought. But somehow, something just seemed a bit *off* about what his aunt had said about her husband. *He'll be fine on his own for a while* was worrying him, somehow. Had they parted on good terms?

"We should get down to the Great Hall", he said, feeling awkward, his voice shaking. "They'll be on puddings soon if we don't hurry..."

"You go on, Harry. I think we'll have our tea here tonight. Petunia can see the Great Hall at breakfast." Mrs. Figg was taking charge again.

Harry rose. "Well, goodnight then. See you in the morning, Aunt Petunia."

"Goodnight, Harry", Mrs. Figg said briskly as his aunt busied herself about buttering a crumpet, not saying anything. Remembering the way she also hadn't said goodbye to him before he left for Ascog, he decided that some things would never change. Then, just as he had put his hand on the knob, he turned and looked at the back of her head again, thinking about how Dudley would have been a blubbering mess at the thought of losing his mother. *It's never going to change if I don't make the first move.* It had worked with his mother, in his other life. Maybe they didn't *have* to have an adversarial relationship forever...

He strode back to his aunt and said, "I'm glad that you're going to be all right. Welcome to Hogwarts, Aunt Petunia." He bent over and kissed her cheek quickly. He was aware of a look of utter shock on his aunt's face (and Mrs. Figg's face) as he returned to the door and let himself out.

Harry started to turn left after leaving his aunt and Mrs. Figg, then thought for a moment and turned right instead. He recognized some familiar paintings from his other life and knew that he was walking in the correct direction now. Then, just before he turned a corner, he heard a familiar voice in the corridor he was about to enter.

"Why, *Miss Dougherty*", the smooth, deep voice said with a hint of amusement. "Are you making an improper suggestion to a *teacher*? Do I need to take away house points?"

Harry heard a sly laugh that sounded disconcertingly like Ginny's, followed by the unmistakable sound of kissing. "Mmm — you were planning on something that would cost me house points? Sounds nice — "

Harry winced; he wished he were anywhere else on the planet, but no one was miraculously whisking him away, and there was that *kissing* sound again.

"Changed your mind, *Miss Dougherty*?" Snape said when the kissing sounds ceased. He sounded slightly disappointed.

"Not entirely. It's just that Harry is probably already feeling uncomfortable enough, and he'd also probably like his dinner —"

Harry sheepishly poked his head around the corner and saw Maggie and Snape standing in the corridor, a nearby door slightly ajar, which Harry assumed was Maggie's room or suite of rooms. Or Snape's. Either

way, he didn't know when he'd felt so embarrassed. "Oh, hello", he said lamely. "I was just helping my aunt settle in —"

Don't worry, Harry, said a voice in his brain. I knew you were there the whole time. I was just having a little fun. Sorry if we embarrassed you.

Maggie? he thought, confused and alarmed. *You can talk to me through my mind?*

I only did it sometimes, accidentally, when I was young. Since I arrived here I've been reading up on it and practicing more.

Harry was flummoxed. *Can you — can you read my mind?*

I can sense your emotions. That's how I knew you were there, around the corner. But I can't technically read your mind. If you think something at me, I can hear you just as though you'd spoken aloud. You have to mean for me to know what you're thinking.

"Er", Harry said awkwardly. "I think I'd like to go back to actually talking. Aloud."

Snape raised one dark eyebrow at her. "Were you doing what I think you were doing?"

She laughed. "Just practicing a little. I've stopped now. We should all get down to dinner." They walked down the last corridor together and left the staff wing, lifting the tapestry out of the way.

As they descended staircase after staircase, Harry glanced nervously at Maggie, wondering whether he was going to start hearing her in his head again. He practically jumped out of his skin when she spoke out loud.

"I thought it would be nice if you and Ron and Ginny and Hermione came to tea in my rooms tomorrow", Maggie said carelessly. "When I ran into Ron earlier, he said that the two of you don't have practice again tomorrow, that you're each having one more during the day on Saturday, before Sunday's match."

"Right. No practice again tomorrow." Several times a week, after classes, Sirius had been taking him by Portkey to Wales and Remus had been taking Ron to Kent. Harry and Ron had been trying not to think about the fact that they had to play each other in their first match. Whichever team won would be continuing on to the quarter-finals. Harry was glad that he wasn't playing Keeper for Wales and hoped he caught the Snitch before Ron managed to make the score too unbalanced for the Welsh team to recover. Ron had been beaming every time he returned from practice; Monty Mathers was over the moon about having snagged Ron. Apparently,

he'd been with the team for over ten years and had had his eye on Charlie for Seeker when Charlie finished school. He'd been sorely disappointed when Charlie had gone off to Romania to study dragons.

"Well", Ron had said rather smugly, "he's finally got a Weasley on the team!"

"Er, yeah", Harry said to Maggie. "Tea tomorrow would be nice."

"Tell the others for me, will you?" she added as they reached the Great Hall. She had been walking arm in arm with Snape until they arrived at the top of the marble stairs; then she disconnected from him and walked next to Harry. She picked up speed, though, when they were at the doorway to the Great Hall, walking in ahead of Harry and striding toward the head table. Harry turned, wondering where Snape was, but found him in the shadows at the edge of the doorway, a smile creeping up at the corners of his mouth as he watched Maggie.

Harry edged over to him, trying not to grin maniacally.

"She makes you happy", he said quietly.

Snape's face closed up at once. "Do I need to take house points for impertinence?" he said in what would be a menacing voice, were it not for the fact that Harry could see how his eyes were dancing merrily. He'd never been so thoroughly reminded of his stepfather by the Snape in this life.

"No, no. But aren't you lucky I was leaving the staff wing when I was? See, this way, you can be seen walking into the Great Hall conversing with the Head Boy and captain of the Dueling Club, rather than the pretty young Seer who just found out she's a witch..."

Snape smirked. "Well. It turns out that you *do* have your uses..."

Harry stifled a laugh. "So. We should actually talk about something. The Dueling Club? Or how about — who do you think will win Sunday's match? England or Wales?"

Harry started walking into the hall, and now Snape was beside him, matching him step for step. "That depends. Are you planning to be under the weather so that Erica Welsh will be playing Seeker? If so, then my money would be on Wales."

"Very funny", Harry said, preparing to sit at the Gryffindor table beside Ron.

"You asked, Potter", Snape replied with a perfectly straight face, nodding at him and then continuing on to the head table. Harry felt happy

for no reason he could explain as he sat next to his best friend. Perhaps it was the prospect of being on better terms with his aunt. Or feeling like he could talk to either Snape *or* Sirius, and not feel guilty about either one of them.

He started helping himself to some cold roast chicken and cold boiled carrots (since he didn't fancy cold, glutinous mashed potatoes), but when he lifted his eyes, he was looking directly at Ginny, and the sad expression on her face went right to his heart. She no longer looked angry with him, but as though she were trying to convince herself, as though staying angry with him would make it easier for her to stay away from him.

He forced himself to look away from her and turned to Ron, starting to spear some pieces of carrot on the end of his fork. "Well, Aunt Petunia's settling in. She and Mrs. Figg are having their tea in their suite tonight." He put some food into his mouth, trying not to meet Ginny's gaze.

It wasn't clear that Ron had noticed he'd said anything. "Oh, good", Ron said, looking up at the head table; "there's Snape. I —" He stopped suddenly when Harry guffawed and almost spit out his food. "What?" Ron demanded indignantly as Harry struggled to swallow without choking.

"It's just that — you're the last person I ever expected to say the words, *Oh, good, there's Snape.*"

Ron picked up Harry's chicken leg, took a large bit out of it, then returned it to Harry's plate. "I 'ave t'get more poshun from 'im", Ron said around the bite of chicken he was harboring in his cheek pouch. The full moon was less than a week away and Ron had been taking potion for several days already.

Now Harry decided to pretend Ron hadn't said anything (and studiously ignored the large bite his best friend had taken from his chicken leg). It was as though they were having two different conversations. Harry had noticed that Ron became somewhat distracted during the time leading up to the full moon. He was especially worried about making certain that he took his potion every day during the week preceding his change into a werewolf.

"Speaking of tea, Maggie's invited the four of us to tea in her rooms tomorrow after classes."

"The four of who?" Ron asked, having chewed and swallowed the chicken.

"You and me and Hermione and Ginny." He did not look at Ginny when he said her name.

Hermione, sitting on Ron's other side, spoke for the first time. "That'll be nice!" she said brightly. "A very pleasant way to begin the weekend."

"Well, she thought that it would be a good time, since neither Ron nor I have to go to a practice again until Saturday."

"You'll understand, I hope, why Ginny and I *have* to cheer for England on Sunday?" Hermione smiled at him. "I mean — even if Ron *weren't* my boyfriend and Ginny's brother, we *are* from England —"

"So am I from England! Or at least, I've lived there most of my life." Harry grinned at her. "All the same, prepare to be disappointed..."

Ron laughed. "Oh, don't you know when I'm kidding?" Hermione said, smiling at Harry. "We'll be carefully dividing up our cheering between both sides. You know, cheering for whoever's ahead at the moment..."

"Oh, *that* won't get you in any trouble from the spectators sitting around you..." Ron intoned sarcastically, reaching for more food. Harry had also noticed that his appetite was greater near the full moon.

Neville, sitting next to Ginny, pushed his plate away and looked grumpy. "It's not fair that everyone in Gryffindor doesn't get to go. Two of our housemates playing in the match! But then — I didn't get to go to the World Cup, either. My gran hates Quidditch. She sent back the permission form, and she'd written across it, *When pigs fly*. I've been of-age for months now. I shouldn't need her permission..."

Hermione looked at him sympathetically. "Everyone needs permission to leave the castle grounds — except for Apparition lessons — whether they're of-age or not. I just hope Professor Dumbledore changes his mind about Hogsmeade weekends..."

"Don't worry, Neville", Ginny said, patting his hand. "No matter who's in the final, Fred and George are getting us tickets, as they have the concessions contract. We'll make sure they get you a ticket, too. You can say you're visiting some friends during the Christmas holiday — which will be true. Surely your gran will let you do that?"

The expression Neville wore as he gazed at Ginny made Harry want to throttle him. *How dare he look at her like that!*

"That — that would be *completely* brilliant, Ginny! You — you'd do that?" Suddenly, he seemed like the old Neville again, rather than the rapidly-matured Neville who'd spent the summer using a Time Turner. But

a moment later, as he gazed at Ginny intently, the boyishness dropped from his face and he seemed suddenly far too serious again. Harry thought he was perhaps uncomfortable with being older without having experienced much during the intervening time. He hadn't gone to school, he hadn't socialized with anyone his own age. He'd just spent what amounted to six months gardening.

She smiled warmly at him, and Harry wondered how she could not see that this was tantamount to leading him on. "Of course." Harry looked at Neville again; his feelings were quite plain on his face, and Harry remembered how he'd tricked Ginny into going to the ceilidh, and he remembered Neville and Ginny walking in the snow together in his other life, and going to the Yule Ball together during the Triwizard Tournament. He'd been accused of being in the pining-for-Ginny-Weasley "club", along with Neville. *Neville!*

And now, Neville was so grown-up and — and *different*. Sometimes. Harry looked down at his food before anyone asked him why he was gawping at Neville. *No*, he thought. *This can't be happening.*

Soon they were eating their puddings, and Neville took a slice of chocolate cake, saying to Ginny, "I may not be able to finish this, Ginny. Would you like to share it with me?"

Harry tried not to watch them taking turns spearing chocolaty lumps on their forks, talking and laughing as Neville regaled her with some funny things Sirius had said during their last Apparition lesson. *It's Sirius who's witty, you prat*, Harry thought resentfully; *you're just parroting his words.*

Suddenly, Harry felt the hair on the back of his neck standing on end and a premonitory sensation prickle over his scalp. He turned and looked across the Great Hall. Draco Malfoy wasn't eating anything; he might have done, but he wasn't moving. A spoonful of trifle was in his hand, which seemed to be frozen in midair. Harry thought he might be glaring at him, but then he realized that he was actually glaring *past* Harry. His face was a mask of utter hatred and revulsion as he watched Neville Longbottom and Ginny Weasley.

* * *

The next morning, after their run, the eight of them were cooling down in the corridor outside Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, as the entrance hall was too chilly. Ginny removed the sweatshirt she'd been wearing over a T-shirt,

briefly wiping the perspiration from her brow with the shirt before continuing to do more stretches for the cool-down. Harry tried not to stare, but it was difficult; the basilisk amulet hung down on the fabric right between her breasts, and he felt as though it would take a super-human effort to focus on anything else in the world. He finally did manage to wrench his eyes away, and saw that Malfoy's gaze had gone to the same place, a lopsided smile on his pale face. Harry grimaced and looked away, seeing Mariah giving Malfoy a somewhat hostile glare. *She's jealous, Harry realized. He's cheating on Ginny with her, and she wants him all to herself.* Harry wondered how he might turn that to his advantage...

But suddenly, he realized that Mariah was no longer looking at Draco Malfoy; her attention had been drawn by the basilisk amulet as well, though not for the same reason that it attracted Harry and Malfoy. She strode over to Ginny and picked up the amulet, holding it in the flat of her palm. She was wearing those fingerless gloves again.

"Where the haill did ye get *this*?"

Ginny frowned at her, then said, "Oh! You mean 'where the *hell*...'"

Mariah looked openly hostile now. "Stop makin' fun o' my accent. Ye know what I mean."

Ginny shook her head. "No, I'm afraid I don't. I — I bought it and gave it to someone, but he didn't keep it." Her eyes flicked briefly in Harry's direction, then back to Mariah.

"Bought it *where*?" Mariah demanded.

Ginny looked nervous; Harry remembered that she'd been in Knockturn Alley to buy the amulet, at Borgin and Burkes, and she looked reluctant to admit this.

"In London", she said quietly, which was technically true.

Mariah didn't question this. She was shaking her head, a disgusted expression on her face. "He had no right. He had *no right* t'saill it..." she said, as though seven baffled people weren't standing around her, waiting for some explanation. *Who had no right to sell it?* Harry wondered.

He was surprised when Draco Malfoy stepped forward and put his hand gently on her shoulder, saying softly, "Who had no right?" as though he had read Harry's mind. The care he was taking with her made Harry's heart leap with hope; maybe he wasn't just shagging Mariah. Maybe, somewhere deep inside, he had actual feelings for her.

She looked into Draco's eyes and spat, "*Munro*."

Tony stepped forward now; he had been helping Ruth do sit-ups when Mariah discovered Ginny's amulet, but they were both standing now. "Isn't that your brother? I think I remember you saying that once, in Potions..."

She looked as though Tony were the one with whom she was angry now. Her dark eyes blazed. "Aye, Munro's m'no-good brither. He had *no right* to saill that", she said, her eyes looking tearful now, as she nodded at the amulet, which Ginny was holding tightly. "Even if he was the one who —"

She stopped abruptly, and Harry's brain lit up with the answer. *In my other life, her brother had never retrieved it from the lake. In this life, some time after 1981, he did.* But Harry had had Gillyweed to help him breathe under the water. No one who went down that deep into the lake would be able to do so without some way of breathing for longer than a normal human could hold his breath. And it seemed that it was in the safekeeping of the merpeople. Had her brother somehow made friends with the merpeople and received it as a gift, as Harry had?

He moved near her now and whispered to her, "How did he get it out of the lake?"

She looked frightened then, her eyes opening wide as she stared at Harry. "How did you know —?" she started to say breathlessly, backing up from him, her face a mask of fear. Then she abruptly turned and fled down the corridor, and after that they heard her footsteps pattering down the marble stairs to the entrance hall, and, presumably, on to the dungeons. The sound echoed into the awkward silence. Before she left, Harry had been able to see the tears on her face. Without a word to any of them, even his girlfriend, Draco Malfoy ran after her, and Harry saw how concerned he looked. *Good, he thought. She needs him. He sees that. Very, very good...*

Then he looked up at the others; Ginny, Ron and Hermione were clearly uncomfortable, as they knew how Harry knew that the amulet had been in the lake. Tony and Ruth just looked lost.

"Er", he said to them, "let's just finish stretching. He'll talk to her. I'm sure it'll be fine." His voice shook and he glanced at Ginny, who had stopped grasping the amulet. She picked it up and put it under her shirt, so that it was out of sight once more. Harry realized then that Mariah must not know that Draco had an identical amulet. She'd probably be quite baffled by that. Did that mean that he went out of his way not to wear it

when they were together? Or — was it actually possible that they weren't sleeping together, that they hadn't done anything that usually involved taking off all of one's clothes? He felt mildly disgruntled about that; if he had some way of knowing the true nature of Draco and Mariah's relationship, that would help tremendously.

After he showered (Malfoy wasn't in the tub in the prefects' bath, he noted), Harry went to the staff wing to see his aunt. He managed to find the right corridor and he rapped cautiously on the door to her suite. Mrs. Figg admitted him.

"Oh, good morning Harry. We're almost done here."

He stepped into their sitting room and saw that his aunt was sitting very still on a stool near the fire, wearing the Sorting Hat. He swallowed. Dumbledore was standing nearby, smiling at Harry, his blue eyes twinkling behind his half-moon spectacles.

"Good morning, Harry", he said, nodding, then turned to look at Petunia Dursley. Harry thought he heard some murmured conversation from under the hat, before it opened what passed for its "mouth" and said very clearly, "*Slytherin!*"

His aunt took the hat off, patting her hair back into place, looking rather pleased with herself. Harry grimaced. *I should have known.*

Mrs. Figg was smiling at her. "Well done, Petunia, well done", she said, as though his aunt *had* actually accomplished something.

Harry smiled feebly at her, while Dumbledore said, "I shall inform Professor Snape that he has a new member of Slytherin House. Slytherin has a long and noble tradition of turning out quite skilled witches and wizards", he said solemnly, looking at Harry out of the corner of his eye.

"Well, it wanted to put me into some other house, but I would have none of it", his aunt said, and Harry dropped his jaw.

"You had a choice, and you chose Slytherin?" But then he remembered that when *he'd* had a choice in his other life, he'd done the same thing. Mrs. Figg bristled.

"Well, I asked Arabella which house *she'd* been in, and she said she and her brother had been in Slytherin. Then I asked her which house Draco was in, and she said he was also in Slytherin. It seemed an obvious choice."

Yeah, thought Harry. *That's what I thought in my other life...*

The odd thing was that he had thought he had a choice of house because of having some of Voldemort's powers. Now he remembered that

Jamie had also said she'd had a choice. Perhaps it was something in his family — specifically his *mother's* family — that had prompted the hat to do this. Then Harry had a sudden realization.

"Professor!" he said to Dumbledore. "Has this ever happened before?"

The headmaster frowned at him. "Has what ever happened before, Harry?"

"A Muggle-born witch or wizard being sorted into Slytherin."

He nodded in understanding. "Ah, I see what you mean. It is rare, true, but it has happened on occasion over the one-thousand-year history of the school." He looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "Now let me see... the last time I recall it occurring was somewhere in the nineteen-fifties... or was it the twenties...?"

Harry swallowed. Clearly it was a rare thing. He looked at his aunt, wondering if she understood the anti-Muggle-born prejudice she was likely to encounter from other Slytherins on the one hand, and the anti-Slytherin prejudice from other witches and wizards on the other hand. Then again, she was one of the most bigoted people he knew. If anyone could hold her own against petty, close-minded people, she could. For a moment, he actually found it touching that she'd opted to be in Slytherin because of Mrs. Figg and Draco Malfoy.

When classes ended that day, Harry was exhausted and half-wished he hadn't accepted Maggie's invitation to tea. The four of them went to the staff wing together; Harry gave the password, then lifted the tapestry, revealing the opening in the wall that was not visible before he'd said the word. Once they were in the entrance corridor and had let the tapestry drop again, Harry looked at the closed doors in confusion; he realized that he didn't know where Maggie's room was. There were no plaques on any of the doors, indicating which professor lived where, and Harry wasn't certain whether he had come upon Snape and Maggie when they were outside his rooms or hers. (He also didn't want to talk about this with Ron around.) He started to walk down the corridor uncertainly, looking from side to side. Then they turned a corner and saw golden light spilling into the corridor from an open door, where Maggie was standing, waiting for them.

"There you are! Come on, then. Severus has everything ready. He's shown me some wonderful spells..."

Ron raised his eyebrows at the mention of Snape's first name, and Harry hoped he would keep a civil tongue in his head and not get hot under

the collar at the idea of Snape and his sister being together. They entered Maggie's sitting room and Harry realized immediately that she was staying in the exact same suite of rooms where his parents had lived in his other life, and where he and Jamie had lived when they were small, before moving to Hogsmeade. While the others chose seats on the couch or one of the chairs near the fire, Harry wandered to the window, which looked out over the grassy courtyard where he and Jamie had played. He was surprised to find that it wasn't empty; Dunkirk was gamboling happily across the grass, chasing a stick arching through the air, attacking it almost the second it landed on the ground. He trotted back in the direction from which he'd come, and when Harry moved his head to the left, he could see that the dog was bringing the stick to the person who'd thrown it: Draco Malfoy. When Dunkirk sat, tail wagging madly, and Draco removed the stick from his jaws, the blond boy was grinning broadly. Harry thought he had probably never seen him looking happier, in this life. He patted the Yorkshire terrier on the head playfully and Dunkirk lost his composure and leapt on Draco, licking his face happily, as Draco grinned and let him, laughing and closing his eyes. Harry's throat hurt as he remembered his best friend romping with some of the dogs that populated the grounds of Malfoy Manor... He saw in his mind's eye a nine-year-old boy, skinny and pale, his fair hair waving as he ran with the pack, laughing so hard he had a stitch in his side, then rolling on the ground with the animals, while they licked his face and nuzzled him...

He turned to the others, who had no idea what he was looking at. He walked back to the fire and said, "Er, Draco is outside. In the courtyard. My aunt must have let him into the staff wing so he could walk Dunkirk. Maybe he'd like to have some tea too?"

Ginny looked up at him in surprise, and so did Maggie. She started to open her mouth to say something, then caught Severus Snape's eye and closed her mouth again. However, as Harry found out soon after, she didn't really decide not to ask a question — she just didn't want her boyfriend to hear it.

Harry, he heard Maggie's voice in his brain now. Are you sure you want to invite him?

He thought of how unguarded Draco Malfoy's face had been, not knowing anyone could see his simple pleasure in the little dog. *I'm sure*, he thought back at her. She nodded.

"Why don't you go ask him if he'd like to do that?" she said aloud. "The way you get to the courtyard is —"

But Harry was already striding back to the outer wall, touching a carved pineapple on the window frame, causing it to open into the room like a door.

"— or", Maggie said, looking unusually flustered, "you could turn the wall into a door I didn't even know existed. Thanks ever so much", she added sarcastically. Harry grimaced. She was the only one present who still didn't know about his other life, although Draco Malfoy might soon be joining her in her ignorance. He stepped out into the courtyard and Draco jerked his head up in surprise.

"Potter! What the hell —? That's a door? What's going on here?"

"Erm, yeah. I just came from Maggie's sitting room. She's invited some of us to tea, and we were just wondering whether you'd like to join us." He nodded at the dog. "Without Dunkirk, I think. Although you could bring him a crumpet or something. He always likes it when Aunt Petunia gives him one."

Draco Malfoy no longer looked like the carelessly happy young man who had been playing with a dog, having it fetch a stick. A mask went up before his grey eyes once more and he looked at Harry suspiciously. Harry's stomach felt both empty and queasy as an overwhelming sense of loss threatened to paralyze his faculties; he suddenly missed his best friend from his other life so badly that it *hurt*. He remembered feeling the same way about Ron when Ron had been a Gryffindor prefect on the fast track to Head Boy and Harry had been the captain and Keeper of the Slytherin Quidditch team.

"I told your aunt that I was going to give Dunkirk some exercise", he said slowly. He looked up at what sky was visible above the confines of the courtyard. "It gets dark a lot earlier these days..."

"You can still give him some exercise. We're not going to be having tea forever." And then he thought of something that might make him respond positively. "Ginny's here", he said simply. To his surprise, Draco Malfoy frowned.

"Oh, I see. You've only come out here to fetch me because Ginny asked you to. Should've known that it wouldn't be *you* actually inviting me to tea."

Harry swallowed. Actually, now that he thought about it, Ginny would probably not be very pleased at all to see her boyfriend. He should have thought of that. But somehow, the way Draco had looked while playing with the dog... both happy and also very alone...

"Yeah, well, do you want to come in or not?" Harry asked, trying to sound more irritated that he was, and unwilling to tell the other boy that he really was the one inviting him into the cozy sitting room. If Draco Malfoy suspected that *he*, Harry, had been feeling kindly toward him, not his girlfriend, he would never hear the end of it. And it also wouldn't look good for Ginny.

"Yeah, I think I might. I could do with a cuppa."

He started to follow Harry toward the door to Maggie's sitting room, but Dunkirk trotted toward him with the stick in his jaws, whining piteously. Draco turned and sighed. He looked down at the anxious dog, appearing resigned. "I'm going to have to trick you, aren't I? All right then..."

He bent over and gently took the stick from Dunkirk, who willingly released it. Draco reared back and threw it across the courtyard, then made a mad dash for the door Harry was holding open. Harry closed it when they were both inside, and, seconds later, he heard the dog's frantic scrabbling, followed by more whining.

This prompted Maggie to come to the door. "Aaaaw", she said sympathetically when she saw Dunkirk looking up at Draco through the window, eyes large and dark and pleading.

"How do you open this again?" she asked Harry, pressing on the window frame. He showed her where the pineapple was — grateful that no one was asking him how he knew this — and she opened the door and let the dog in.

He immediately ran to Draco Malfoy, who picked him up, letting the dog lick his face for a moment before saying, "All right, all right, that's enough." He was looking at the other people in the room, clearly slightly embarrassed. Harry couldn't help notice that Ginny was looking at Draco rather sadly, and even Hermione seemed to be regarding him sympathetically for once. Ron clearly didn't care for the girls' reactions to the Draco-Dunkirk bonding; he was scowling. Snape looked as though he was trying to hide his amusement, and Harry marveled at the way he was

reminding him more and more of his stepfather in his other life. Perhaps it *was* possible for this Severus Snape to be happy.

When Draco sat down, Dunkirk settled himself obediently at his feet while they went through the ritual of pouring the tea and passing the plates of biscuits and crumpets round the group.

"What do you like better so far?" Ginny asked her older sister as she poured milk into her tea. "Teaching or going to classes as a student?"

Maggie looked thoughtful. "Hmm. Well, I adore Transfiguration with Professor McGonagall. And Professor Flitwick is very pleasant and always so cheerful, plus I feel like I'm really learning so many useful things with him. Potions, on the other hand", she gave an exaggerated shrug and sigh, "I could take or leave..." A smile was pulling at the corner of her mouth and Snape raised one eyebrow, although Harry could tell he wasn't upset at her playfulness. Then she tapped a Tarot deck on the table with her finger. "And when it comes to teaching — well, let's just say I'm glad I'm doing the third and fourth years and not the older students."

Ginny looked saddened. "Really? Why not? What about us is so dreadful?"

Maggie looked alarmed. "Oh, Ginny! I'm sorry. That didn't come out very well. It's just that — well, I'm finding with the fourth-year students that there are a number of things that Professor Trelawney taught that —" She pressed her lips together. "Well, I don't want to criticize, but let's just say I would have — and I am doing — some things differently. Tarot, for instance. Nothing is discussed in third and fourth year concerning Tarot, usually, and then, near the beginning of fifth year, Sybill has the students doing readings. You can't just start off doing readings after looking at a book for an afternoon. You have to consider each and every card in the deck and meditate on it, really attempt to understand it on its own before you try to do a reading for anyone. You have to think of all of the good and bad things about it, so that you can imagine what it may mean for someone who's having a reading done where it turns up in a positive position, and in a negative position. And also, by understanding your own reaction to a card, you can attempt to filter out your own relationship with the card when you are doing a reading for someone else, to avoid muddling up the reading with your own issues..."

She looked around at them all and blushed. "Oh, listen to me. As if anyone cares about this. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to —"

"No, no", Harry said suddenly, remembering that Trelawney had done a reading for him near the beginning of his fifth year, on the day he'd worn Sandy to class and predicted that Parvati would set herself afire. "So, you're having the third and fourth years meditate on the cards?"

"And write essays about what the cards make them think about. That should keep them occupied for about half the year, as I've been assigning one essay a week, and then we discuss the essays in class, and the symbology of various things on the cards. They're coming out with some amazing insights. I've really been enjoying that. Some of them are rather impatient, of course, thinking from what they'd heard from older students that they would be reading tea leaves and seeing things in crystal balls the first week. I think some of them think I'm a bit slow. And the third-year Gryffindors are such pranksters! They think it's so funny to see how gullible I am, telling me ridiculous tales about what you can and cannot do with magic... Amy and Andy Donegal are the worst of the lot. But then, that's often true with twins."

Ron and Ginny burst out laughing, and then Maggie did too. "Oh, my! I forgot that I have brothers who are twins. And you've told me what scamps they were in school", she said to Ginny. "I'll bet they would put Amy and Andy to shame."

Ron nodded with feeling. "You haven't had any of their sweets yet, have you?"

Maggie frowned. "I started to, the first time I went — I mean went back — to the Burrow, but Molly snatched it out of my hand. It looked like an ordinary toffee..." Harry was confused for a moment, but then he realized that it would make sense for Maggie to call Molly Weasley by her first name, when she already had someone in her life she had called "Mum" for almost twenty years.

Hermione's eyes went wide. "Oh, good Lord. It's a good thing you didn't. Harry's cousin had one of those Ton-Tongue Toffees once. They're a nightmare!"

Ron shrugged. "Plenty of people think they're a hoot. Sales have been brilliant, Lee says."

The conversation went on, but somehow Harry had a hard time really hearing it. He drank his tea, but over the rim of his cup, he saw Ginny gazing at him, looking so heartbroken and forlorn that he wanted to do anything in the world to cheer her up. The words the others were speaking

swirled around him, but they didn't penetrate his brain. At least, until Maggie spoke to him *through* his brain.

Are you all right, Harry?

He almost dropped his teacup and saucer, fumbling with them for a moment, so that he spilled some tea down his front. Draco Malfoy guffawed and shook his head, but Harry ignored him.

Well, truthfully — no, I'm not.

It's Ginny, isn't it?

He looked furtively at Maggie, who was quietly buttering a scone, not looking at anyone. Then she looked up for a moment and caught Harry's eye, before turning her eyes on her little sister, who was gazing into the depths of her cup and stirring her tea incessantly without actually drinking it.

Yes.

Maggie didn't respond right away. Then, while she was chewing a bite of food, she thought at Harry, *I could tell, the way you look at her whenever the two of you are in the same room. And I sensed your feelings toward her, as well. I'm sorry, Harry. It must be very difficult to have feelings for someone who already has a boyfriend...*

She does, but — but she doesn't love him!

But — I've felt feelings of love coming from her. I just assumed they were for him.

Harry was silent. Was it true? Did she really love Draco Malfoy? He glanced at the other boy out of the corner of his eye. *She told me that she doesn't love him. She said she loves me. And I love her. She said she's — afraid for me. Afraid of what he might do if she breaks up with him.* A split second after he thought this at Maggie, he realized that he shouldn't have admitted all of these things, but then he realized that Maggie, though she was seeing Severus Snape, was not going to be blindly loyal to everyone in Slytherin. And he had a feeling that Maggie was more than capable of keeping this information to herself.

I see. Will you excuse me a moment, Harry?

Harry finished his tea and set his cup down, looking furtively at Ginny, whom he saw had a startled expression in her eyes. *Maggie must be talking to her,* he realized. The two of them seemed to be communicating without spoken words for some time. Harry tried to pay attention to what Hermione and Ron and Draco were saying; as usual, Draco was being

disagreeable and baiting Hermione about something, and Ron was on the verge of throttling the Slytherin.

"I just think that Ireland have a much better chance in the European Cup than either Wales or England. I'd like to see England do well as much as the next man, but let's say that my hopes for England were recently *dashed*," he said pointedly, glaring at Ron as he chewed a biscuit with an insufferably smug expression. Ron was gripping the edge of his chair so that his knuckles were turning white, and Hermione was slowly turning red.

"They haven't seen a player as good as Ron in donkey's years! You're just jealous that —"

Harry tuned them out again. *Same old same old*. Malfoy knew how to set off both Ron and Hermione and they leapt at the bait. He sighed inwardly. Suddenly, Maggie's voice was in his head again.

Harry.

Er, what?

As you may have guessed, I've been speaking to Ginny. She confirms what you said.

His heart leapt within him. That meant that — that she must have told her sister that she loved him. She still loved him! He looked at Ginny with his heart overflowing, trying not to reveal too much in his expression. Fortunately, Draco, Ron and Hermione were still consumed with their argument.

"I can't believe old Monty Mathers is still running things. I mean, shouldn't he have been put out to pasture by now? I think his hiring you, Weasley, just confirms that he's growing senile..."

Harry, Maggie said again, trying to get his attention back; Ron had raised his voice and it was hard for Harry to concentrate on anything else.

Right. I'm here.

I've been doing some reading about this, and — I'd like to try something. I'm going to attempt to be a medium for you and Ginny, so you can talk. Not the usual kind of medium, to be sure, but — I'm going to allow what Ginny says to me to pass directly to you, and what you say to me to pass to her. I'm going to try to stay out of it utterly. I don't want to eavesdrop or anything. She said the two of you can't really talk freely, so perhaps this will help a bit? You can just think of my brain as a passage allowing you to reach each other temporarily...

Harry felt like saying thanks a thousand times would never be sufficient for what Maggie was doing for them. She turned to Severus Snape, sitting quietly next to her, listening to Ron and Hermione and Draco argue with a bemused expression on his face. She said to him, "I don't wish to be rude, but I'm feeling a little migraine coming on and I'm just going to close my eyes for a few minutes and do a visualization exercise I know that often helps me a great deal. I've been doing this for years. I don't want anyone to think I've been so rude as to fall asleep or anything. Carry on; I'll be fine."

And with that, she leaned back and closed her eyes, looking very peaceful. Harry poured himself some more tea, trying to look very casual about it and not look at Ginny. Then Ron picked that moment to begin talking to him.

"Harry — has Ludo Bagman been hanging about when you have practice? He's been down in Kent with us a slew of times. Talks to Monty a lot. Think I should worry?"

Harry shrugged. "Only if he asks you to throw the game and you see a gaggle of goblins following him about... He's been at our practices a few times too. I just thought it was because of his Ministry job, with the Department of Magical Games and Sports. You know."

Draco Malfoy frowned. "Fix the game? Surely not. I mean — that would be unethical. Think of his position."

Hermione looked at him shrewdly. "Considering who your father is, you say some rather naive things at times, Malfoy."

Now the Slytherin looked like he'd just woken up. "You mean —"

"You didn't know!" Ron crowed. "Why, all through the Triwizard Tournament —"

Harry.

He started; the voice in his brain was like Maggie's and yet not like Maggie's. He glanced briefly at Ginny, who was studying the inside of the bottom of her teacup. He looked away from her again.

Ginny? Is that you? Is this actually working?

There seemed to be a little bit of a delay as his words were filtered through Maggie and back to Ginny. Finally, a voice in his head said, *It's me. Oh, Harry! I've missed you so much...*

I've missed you too. But I thought — I thought you were hacked off at me. Because — because I said Malfoy needed you after what he did to

Fleur. I thought perhaps you never wanted to talk to me again.

I wanted to talk to you every moment of every day. But I was afraid. What happened the last time we were alone together —

Right, he thought at her, drawing his lips into a line and taking a biscuit. He glanced at Maggie, leaning against the back of the couch with her eyes closed, two small vertical lines appearing and disappearing between her brows as she concentrated on helping Harry and Ginny communicate wordlessly. So you let me think you were still cross so that we — we wouldn't lose control and —

Right, she said, echoing him. But technically, I am still cross about what you said.

He grimaced, then tried to smooth his features out again, so no one looking at him would think he was mad. Ron and Hermione were still regaling Draco Malfoy with the tale of the almost-blackmail scheme that the twins had tried with Ludo Bagman, and Bagman trying to help Harry win the tournament because of his other debts to the goblins. The three of them actually seemed to be getting along now, however briefly. He was vaguely aware of Snape participating in the conversation as well, giving his opinion of Bagman (they knew each other in school).

I'm sorry about that Ginny. Sometimes — sometimes I think I'm just a selfish person at heart. I want you, and I want to have my former best friend back, behaving the way he did when he was my best friend. And I want to have my sister in this life, so she can be with him, and I want Ron to be my best friend too, and I want him and Hermione to be happy... And I want for Voldemort never to have gotten his body back, I want Cedric to walk in the room and start talking about the job his dad got him at the Ministry, I want Sirius not to know what it feels like to be in Azkaban for twelve years, I want, I want, I want —

Harry, Harry, I know. Oh, I know. So many dreadful things have happened.

He looked at her now; she was idly shuffling through the Tarot cards, looking at the pictures, moving on to the next one and the next one... He glanced out of the corner of his eye at the others, engrossed in speculations about corruption.

"Fudge? Oh, yeah. He was always kissing up to my dad. He could be rather funny, actually..." Draco Malfoy was saying.

Ginny, he thought at her. Look at me.

Harry! I don't dare. He sitting right there!

Please! I need you to look at me when I say this, he thought, even though technically he wouldn't be saying it but thinking it. Finally, she lifted her eyes to his and he swallowed, glad that he didn't have to try to get his throat to work, as he didn't think it would be likely to cooperate.

I love you. What I said in the common room — forget about that. I was — I was trying not to be selfish, for once. The truth is — if you ever slept with him, I'd go insane. I couldn't bear it. I love you and don't want him to touch you...

Oh, Harry. That's all I wanted to hear you say...

Well, technically I still haven't said it...

He heard a laugh in his head. *I do love you, Harry...*

I love you, Ginny.

He tried to direct his thoughts at Maggie now. *You can open your eyes, Maggie. Thank you for your help.*

Glad to be of service, Harry.

She opened her eyes and sat up. Severus Snape put his hand lightly on her upper back, looking concerned. "Feeling better?"

She smiled at him and Harry. "Much. Never fails."

Harry jumped into a lull in the conversation. "Anyway, I remember Rita Skeeter saying to me that she knew things about Ludo Bagman that would curl my hair..."

They all stared at him.

Ron cleared his throat. "Erm, Harry we're talking about Charms class now. Where've you been?"

"And it was *my* hair Rita said would curl. She turned it into a crack about my appearance, naturally..." Hermione said, sounding miffed, as though it had just occurred. Ron grinned and mussed her curls with his large hand.

"I love your hair..."

Hermione swatted his hand away, but a small smile was pulling at the corners of her mouth. Harry felt himself redden. "Oh. I, er, was listening to something Sandy was saying to me. Sorry. Distracted."

This meant, of course, that Sandy actually did speak up. "Why are you lying, Harry Potter?" she asked him now.

He smiled feebly at them all. "Heh. Hear that? There she goes again. She's quite the chatty snake."

"But I didn't hear anything before", Hermione said, frowning.

"She may not think much of Seers", Sandy said to him now, "but that girl isn't stupid." Harry thought it probably would not be a good idea to take her out and throttle her.

"You all were talking so noisily you wouldn't have heard a little hissing..." he said hurriedly.

"So", Hermione said, raising her eyebrows. "Did she have anything *interesting* to say?" Harry knew what she meant. She was wondering whether Sandy was giving a prediction.

"Er, no. She was just asking a question about something. The human world still confuses her a bit, so she asks me questions about things."

"I am frequently confused, for instance, by your need to lie", Sandy said archly. Harry forced himself not to scowl.

Hermione was looking at him shrewdly. "But I didn't hear you answering her. You were just staring at your tea."

Harry didn't care for the way they were all staring at *him*. (Except for Ginny and Maggie.) "Well — I —"

"I'm afraid you haven't done a very good job, Potter, of covering up", Snape said now in his usual smooth way. Harry looked at him in panic. *Covering up. He said covering up. Oh, bugger, he's going to spoil everything...* "You're making a habit of this. Last week when you were staring into space during my class, you nearly added an extra star anise to your Credulo Potion, which would have turned it into such deadly poison that a single drop on your *skin* could have killed you. If Miss Granger hadn't noticed what you were about to do, you might not be among the living now."

Harry smiled feebly at him, grateful. Had Maggie said something to him, without words? *Fine*, he thought. *I'll be a lazy dunderhead*. He glanced at Draco Malfoy, who was rolling his eyes. *Why can't you be like the Draco who was my friend for fourteen years?* he thought. *Why do you have to be such a git?*

"You caught me. I'm just knackered..."

Ron laughed and slapped him rather too hard on the back. "Wondered why you were being so quiet." He nodded at Ginny. "And you've been uncharacteristically quiet, too. What's your story?" Harry couldn't tell whether he was suspicious. Luckily, as far as Harry knew, even his werewolf hearing shouldn't be able to pick up on telepathic conversations.

Ginny was still shuffling through the Tarot cards. "Oh, I was just looking at Maggie's deck. Her cards have different pictures than mine. See?" she said feebly, holding up one of the cards, swallowing, hoping she would be believed.

Harry noticed that the one she just happened to be holding up was the winged lion card that Trelawney had said represented *him* when she was doing the reading for him. He didn't remember much of the reading — not having put much credence in what she was saying at the time — but he remembered *that card*.

He looked at Maggie. "Which card is that?" he asked her disingenuously. "I can't see the number from here."

She picked the card gently out of Ginny's hand. "That's number five: the Hierophant. Also called the Priest. Usually one of the Priest cards shows someone looking like a king or emperor, enthroned. But this is a deck Sybill told me she bought in Venice. Probably some Venetian witch or wizard made the deck with the priest looking like this because the winged lion is the symbol of St. Mark, the patron saint of Venice. See the book under his paw? That's on the Venetian flag. The flag is quite lovely, really, all scarlet and gold. Very much like the Gryffindor banners I've seen in the castle, except that on the Venetian flag the lion has the wings and the book."

Harry frowned. *Venice?* Was there some connection to Godric Gryffindor — who'd also been a golden griffin Animagus — and Venice? He knew someone who had relatives from Venice, he knew he did, but who was it? As he wracked his brain, trying to remember, the conversation whirled around him again...

* * *

While he was eating his dinner, Harry felt as though someone's eyes were drilling holes in the back of his head. He finally yielded to temptation and looked behind him, seeing Mariah Kirkner's gaze fixed firmly on him. He swallowed, wondering whether she had perhaps been reciting an incantation to jinx him so that he became ill from his dinner. He had some food in his throat at that moment, too, and was now finding it very hard to swallow. He tried to fight a tide of panic rising in him as she got to her feet and approached the Gryffindor table. *What if she asks me how I knew the amulet had been in the lake?*

"Can I talk to ye fer a minute, Harry?" she said with her lilting accent. He nodded, and she motioned with her head to the entrance hall. "In private."

Dean and Seamus decided at that moment to act like a pair of ten-year-olds; next to him, Dean started putting his elbow in Harry's ribs and saying, "Go get 'er, Harry."

"Harry the girl-magnet strikes again", Seamus said, trying to sound like an American comedian he liked. Harry didn't especially like the comedian he was imitating, and he frowned as he rose and followed her, while Dean and Seamus got some of the younger students involved in cat-calls and whistles. Harry glanced momentarily at Ginny, who was clearly not happy about this.

Once they were in the entrance hall, Harry turned irritably to Mariah. "What is it?" he snapped. Then he relented, remembering how distraught she'd been when she'd discovered Ginny wearing the amulet.

"Not here", she said, glancing at the Great Hall. "A little farther away..." She climbed the marble stairs and Harry followed her up to the corridor outside Myrtle's bath, where they'd been stretching when Mariah had noticed Ginny's amulet. She twisted her robes nervously once they stopped. "It's nothing, really", she said, her voice quaking as though she'd meant to say the opposite. "I just — I have a taist to prepare fer in Potions. It's on Tuesday. Trouble is — I have fourth watch Monday night, which is really Tuesday mornin' at four-thairty. I was won'drin' whaither ye could switch shifts with me. Ye have fourth watch t'night. Ye could sleep in a bit t'morrow and I'll take yer shift at four-thairty. Ye'd take mine on the mornin' o'my taist so I can be waill-raisted fer it."

Harry scrutinized her. *That's why she had to drag him up the stairs? To ask him to switch a shift with him?* "That's it? We switch fourth shifts? You do tonight and I do Monday for you?" She nodded. He nodded back. "All right. It's a deal. I have practice tomorrow anyway, for Sunday's match; getting up at four o'clock for a four-thirty shift is probably the last thing I need."

She smiled at him and he noticed that she had a dimple in each cheek when she did this. "See? It wairks oot fer us both." He felt strange and light-headed, looking at her, and didn't notice that she was standing very close to him until she suddenly put one of her hands — in a fingerless glove — on his arm. He was aware of how dark her shining eyes were, how

artfully messy her dark wiry hair was, how nicely her robes hung on her frame, far more developed and mature than when she'd asked him to the ceilidh when she was only in fourth year...

He shook his head suddenly, as if to clear it, and she backed up from him, laughing. "Thanks, Harry. Enjoy yer lie-in."

He watched her go down the stairs, wondering why he'd felt so strange and floaty. It was almost like when he'd been under the Imperius Curse, but not quite. And why should she try to curse him to get him to switch shifts with him? He was very confused. He didn't *think* she had cursed him, but then why did his head feel so strange?

He turned, surprised to see Ginny standing at the foot of the stairs looking up at him; her face appeared to be on the verge of collapsing into tears at any moment. *She thinks I'm going to start carrying on with Mariah now*, he thought. He had no words; he *had* been looking at Mariah and thinking about how pretty she was, beautiful even, not having any idea why these thoughts had entered his brain when he was completely and utterly in love with Ginny. She wouldn't look at him but hurried up the marble steps, her robes gathered in both fists. As she turned into the corridor where he was, she streaked past him as though he wasn't there, and he thought he saw the torches reflecting off a wet patch of skin on her cheek...

* * *

Harry was feeling at loose ends. It was Friday night, and he had previously planned to go to bed early, since he was going to get up at four o'clock. Now that he didn't have to, he felt odd and random, sitting by the fire in the common room, wishing he knew what Mariah's story was. Hermione was busy doing revision, as usual, but she looked up suddenly and frowned at Harry.

"What are you still doing down here, Harry? Oughtn't you to get some sleep? You have the four-thirty shift."

"No I don't. Mariah switched with me. I'm doing hers on Monday night. Er, Tuesday morning. You know what I mean."

"Oh. I wish people would do this properly..." she said, sounding irked as she pulled a parchment out of her rucksack and scanned down it, making the correction with her favorite quill. "That means that Mariah and Draco Malfoy are the fourth watch tonight..."

Harry frowned. "Draco Malfoy? That isn't his usual shift, is it? He's usually on fourth watch with me on Wednesday night. Or Thursday morning. Whatever."

"He switched. And *again* I had to find out second hand."

"I was going to tell you", he said quickly. "I just did, didn't I? That's what Mariah was asking me about", he added a little more loudly, for Ginny's benefit. She seemed to be ignoring him, though, and also hadn't shown any signs of hearing Hermione say that Draco and Mariah were going to be on the same shift.

Hermione sighed as she put her parchment away. "People around here have no sense of *order*..."

Ron grinned at her, and Harry felt a leap in his stomach. *They were so lucky*. Ron was clearly finding her need for *order* endearing (even though he'd once been irked by it). He and Ginny were playing chess nearby, and Harry was trying not to stare at Ginny, who still seemed to be more miffed than distraught with him after finding him talking to Mariah, even though he'd just said why she had wanted to talk to him. Dean and Seamus' antics at the Gryffindor table had also probably not helped, he thought. He wished that Maggie was there so they could talk without the others hearing them.

Then he thought about Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner both being on the pre-dawn shift together, and the fact that they'd switched shifts to do it. *They were planning something*, he thought, sighing. Surely they weren't just going to be wandering up and down corridors. If only he could arrange for Ginny to actually catch them together! Not just spotting them on the map, but *actually seeing them together*, witnessed by Draco and Mariah, so that they *knew* she knew. Harry thought of how proud she was; if she were caught out that way, she'd *have* to break up with Malfoy on the spot. He hated the idea of humiliating her, but it would be far more humiliating for her to see the clear evidence of Malfoy's unfaithfulness and forgive him and stay with him. Besides, he reasoned, Malfoy could hardly blame *him* for a breakup if it came about because Ginny caught her boyfriend and Mariah red-handed (so to speak). *Yeah, unless he spots that I've made it possible for her to "stumble" on their tryst...*

He sighed, staring into the fire, vaguely aware of what was happening in Ginny and Ron's chess game. Hermione, in the chair opposite Harry's before the fire, had put the parchment away and was reading once more. *I*

need some way of finding out their patterns, he thought. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to *be* a pattern. It came rather out of the blue that Mariah wanted to swap shifts with him. He also wasn't certain how many other times the two of them might have conspired to be on the same shift together. He tended to let Hermione oversee the patrol schedule, and any changes made to it.

He glanced at Ginny again; she had just taken Ron's knight with her queen. He didn't realize that his heart was on his face until Ron made his move and then happened to look up and meet Harry's eyes. Harry's stomach leapt when he saw Ron's expression of comprehension; he glanced back and forth, back and forth, between Harry and Ginny.

"Ginny", he said suddenly, "I have to talk to Harry about something. We'll continue this when I get back." He stood and grabbed Harry's arm. "C'mon, Harry."

Harry staggered to his feet, stumbling after Ron. He couldn't have stopped him if he'd tried. He didn't dare look at Ginny as Ron pulled him up the spiral stairs to their dorm.

Ron slammed the door and turned to face his best friend. He didn't speak at first, but then finally he began pacing and running his fingers through his orange hair, making it stand on end.

"When were you going to tell me, Harry?"

Harry didn't have to wonder what he was talking about. He sat on the edge of his bed and looked at his hands. "I don't know. Should I have told you when you were holding me upside down that morning at Hog's End?"

"Wh — what?" Ron sputtered. "So you two really were —"

"No, Ron! I told you later that that's when I first told Ginny about my other life, and that's true. But there's something else we talked about as well — keeping our distance from each other the entire time, I might add."

Ron surveyed him shrewdly. "Why do I think that wasn't for my benefit?"

Harry grinned. "You're right. It wasn't. I'll explain about that in a minute."

"So what else did you two talk about?"

Harry swallowed, remembering how happy he'd been to hear her say the words. "She told me that she doesn't love Draco Malfoy. She loves me."

Ron's jaw dropped. Then he leapt up, a grin splitting his face, and he gave Harry a sudden crushing hug. "No more Malfoy! That's fantastic! I was afraid we'd be putting up with that sod for years to come! You know, Harry, that all joking aside, I'd rather you were with Ginny any day. You know that, don't you?"

Harry felt incredibly grateful to have Ron as a friend. He slapped Ron on the back and smiled grimly. "I know, Ron. And at other times, I know you're being protective of Ginny because you love her and don't want her to be hurt. It's natural. I had the same impulses toward my sister."

Ron laughed. "Except that your sister only had three brothers. Ginny has six. Plus, there's Maggie; she and Ginny have really bonded now, too."

"So I have to stand up to the scrutiny of all seven of you, plus your parents, in other words."

"No pressure, though." Then Ron's smile faded and he looked at Harry with a hostile frown. "Wait a minute. That was almost two months ago. Why's she still with Malfoy? And she was so worried about you when you were showing me and Hermione your Pensieve, and she came running in here... I just thought — she called you a friend —"

Then suddenly, he picked Harry up by the front of his robes and pushed him against the wall. "Did my sister spill her heart out to you and then get it stomped on? And now you're having second thoughts?"

Harry glared at him. "Put me down, Ron", he said evenly, trying not to be reminded of giving Fang orders. Reluctantly, his friend complied, still looking at him suspiciously. "Do you think that Ginny would have called me her friend the next morning when we were in Hogsmeade if she had told me she loved me and I said nothing? Of *course* I told her I love her. And that wasn't the first time. She knew how I felt about her. She's known for almost a year."

"A year! But — you didn't break up with Hermione until my birthday!"

Harry looked at him, arms crossed. "And you and Hermione were snuggling in the common room late at night."

"We were not snogging —"

"I said *snuggling*. Yes, yes, I told Ginny I loved her when I was still with Hermione. I should have broken up with her. But I didn't do it because you told me I should, remember? I was being contrary and you were being a prat. I thought we'd already covered this."

"Yeah, yeah, all right."

Harry sighed. "See, we started flying together. I would go up to the Astronomy Tower after classes and Ginny would ride on me in my griffin form. We used to come down in a clearing in the forest and talk or lie back and look at the clouds... and one day she was attacked by that Lethifold that escaped from Hagrid. I conjured a Patronus and we escaped back to the castle. After we landed, I was so glad she was safe, and — and I kissed her. And she kissed me back." Harry was glad to see that Ron was too shocked to hit him. "I — I was so sure she loved me. But she pulled back from me and said she couldn't meet me any more. Then, after I told her about my other life — you see, that was the reason why I walked into her room at three in the morning. It used to be *my* room. Anyway, after I told her all that, she said she didn't want to lie to me anymore. She had decided that she couldn't go flying with me any more because she was afraid Draco Malfoy would find out and retaliate against me in some way. That's why we couldn't sit too close together, so in case Malfoy was holding his amulet —"

"What? What are you talking about? And why did you give Ginny back the amulet she gave you? Wasn't that a birthday present?"

Harry sighed. "Yes, it was. And I also found it in my other life. I got it from the lake, remember? And then when I was at Godric's Hollow, talking to myself — I also mentioned this to you and Hermione, but you haven't seen it yet — I gave it to myself. I mean, the me from the other life gave it to the me who had just arrived there from King's Cross. So when I got on the train with you afterward, I had two of them. One that I already had, and one from — from a time traveler. Me. I tried to give it to her at Christmas, and that's when I first told her I love her. She refused to take it. Later, after we rescued Snape, I decided I had to resign myself to her being with Malfoy and I gave the pair of amulets to him, for him and Ginny to wear, as a couple."

"I still don't understand. What does that have to do with the two of you sitting close together?"

Harry sighed. "When Ginny first went to buy the amulet, she said she decided to get it because when she held it, she saw *me*. Actually saw me at that moment, on Privet Drive."

"She *saw* you?"

Harry nodded, his lips drawn into a line. "I wish I understood it better. I think she may have seen me because — because she loves me. Now,

when I first touched the amulet, I didn't see anyone. But whenever I held it, I felt — better. Contented. Calm. And holding it always reminded me of Ginny, because she'd given it to me. In fact, I think Hermione suspected that it made me think of Ginny, and that's why she didn't want me to be wearing it the first time we —"

Harry took one look at Ron's face and stopped short, swallowing. "Um, never mind. Anyway, she's pretty sure that Malfoy can see her when he holds the amulet, so we stayed separated. That night she also told me that she loves me and that she knew Draco Malfoy was cheating on her —"

Ron's eyebrows flew up. "He can see her any time he wants? And that bastard is cheating on my sister?"

"Would you rather he was sleeping with her or someone else?"

Ron faltered. "Er, okay. Good point. But if he's cheating on her, how can he see her with that amulet thing? How can he love her and do that?"

"I don't know..." Harry did his best to explain to his best friend Ginny's reasons for staying with Draco Malfoy. "And it's not like I didn't once have some of the same thoughts. In fifth year, I thought Ginny might be the only thing keeping Malfoy on the right side. And he *did* put his dad in prison."

"Self-interest", Ron ruled. "Like everything he does."

"Right. I agree. But — now we know about the Obedience Charm. It complicates things."

Ron made a face. "I'd forgotten about that. Blimey. You're damn lucky you don't have that, too."

"Don't I know it. I felt like I wanted to scream in frustration when I couldn't stun Riddle or anything. I was *so close* to fixing the timelines, and I thought everything I'd gone through to get back to the night my parents died had been for nothing —"

Ron nodded. Harry hadn't shown him and Hermione his encounter with Riddle, but he had described it. Hermione had been horrified when he said he'd tried to perform *Avada Kedavra* — but she had also understood. Ron wasn't horrified at all. He said he would have done the same thing.

He slapped Harry on the back. "Well, you managed to put things right again, and if you hadn't tried and failed to hex Riddle, we wouldn't even know about Malfoy having this Obedience Charm on him."

"No, it was my mum, remember? She told me in the cave, before she tried to kill you. That's *why* she tried to kill you, because if I received a

direct order and refused, I'd die."

"Oh, right..."

"Still. I was starting to think I'd be stuck in that other life forever..."

Ron clapped his hands together purposefully. "What we need to do is to break up my sister and Malfoy without it having anything to do with *you*."

"That's why I was glad that Katie decided to tell Ginny about Felice. I was hoping —"

"Who?" Harry explained the hedge maze incident to him.

"Why, that little —" Ron was fuming. "And then he wrote *what* in that letter?" Harry told him.

Now his friend was pacing again, running his fingers through his hair, the grey lock flopping back down onto his brow each time. Harry noticed now that there were a few grey hairs in his beard, as well, making Ron look more like he was in his thirties or forties rather than his teens.

"I can't believe that you didn't tell me Malfoy was shagging every girl in England!"

Harry made a face. "I only knew about the one. Well, and Mariah. Except that I don't know for certain how far that's gone."

More pacing and finger-combing. "We have to find a way to break them up, Harry."

"Don't you think I know that? Why do you think I'm trying to work out a way for Ginny to catch them at it? She's too proud not to break up with him if that happens."

Ron was nodding while he was pacing. "Right. But how to do it? We can't just stay awake twenty-four hours a day, watching the map..." He paced some more, then stopped. "I know! We can do it in shifts. I'll take the days, you can take the nights..."

"Don't be stupid, Ron. Most of the time they can't do anything. We should watch it at the obvious times. Like tonight, for instance. Both of them switched their shifts so they'll be on at four-thirty in the morning, when neither one of them is usually patrolling at that time. Only trouble is, I have a hard enough time getting up for one of those fourth shifts. Once I tried setting my clock to check on them during the third shift, and I never heard it go off. Neville told me off the next day because *he* had to do it. I was sleeping like the dead. What we really need is some sure way to wake up at a particular time..."

Now Ron was pacing the floor saying, "Time, time, time..." He stopped and his face lit up. "I know! Ever since you told us about — what's in the Pensieve — Hermione's been looking up time spells. The one you and Riddle did really fascinated her. She got permission from McGonagall to take this book out of the Restricted Section. That *Tempus Fugit* spell is in there too. I'll bet there's some sort of alarm clock spell, if we take the time to look."

Harry was skeptical. "Alarm clock spell? Oh, come on. *Tempus Bonae Voluntatis* is a complicated tandem spell, and *Tempus Fugit* is dark magic. I doubt that a simple alarm clock spell would be in the same book."

"Why not? It's a time spell. Can't hurt to ask. I'll ask Hermione about it. I'll just say that my alarm clock broke and I want to make sure I get up on time to go running every day."

"She'll ask you why I can't just wake you up. Which is what I usually do anyway."

"Hmm. All right. We'll say *your* clock is broken too. Because — because you accidentally set it for two in the morning and it woke up Neville and he bashed it against the wall because he was hacked off."

"She'll never believe that. Make it Seamus. *That* she'd believe."

Ron shrugged. "All right. But I'll just bet she knows about a time spell in that book that will get us up in plenty of time to catch Draco Malfoy cheating on my sister with Mariah Kirkner."

Harry nodded. "First, we need to verify exactly what they're doing. Then we need to find out a future time when they'll be getting together, and make certain Ginny stumbles on them, and that there's absolutely no possibility of their worming their way out of it with some ridiculous story. Mind you, it's Ginny who'd probably make up the story, so she wouldn't have to break up with him and put me at risk. We need to make it *impossible* for her *not* to break up with him."

"Right", Ron agreed. "Fourth shift tonight, you said? That doesn't give us much time to practice the spell, or test it first to see whether we've done it right. I'll go talk to Hermione first, to see whether she knows about a spell in that book that could do the trick."

Harry watched him go with trepidation. He thought it was possible that Ron was just a little bit too enthusiastic about trying to break up Ginny and Draco Malfoy, which meant that there was a danger that he would fail to be as prudent and circumspect as he needed to be.

Harry thought desperately, *Please please please let this work...*

* * *

Ron came trudging back up the stairs and into the seventh-year dorm looking gloomy and down at the mouth. "Sorry I took so long, Harry. I actually forgot I was playing chess with Ginny. I took a fall and let her win to cut it short." Harry snorted, knowing what a good player Ginny was, and Ron glared at him momentarily before going on. "I looked at Hermione's book." He sighed. "We'll just have to try to stay awake, Harry. The one page that had a clock spell is torn out."

Harry sat with his chin in his hands. "Brilliant. Now what are we going to do?"

Ron sat on his bed and sighed noisily. "I suppose we'll actually have to *look* for what we want ourselves", he said wearily.

"What? In our own books? Instead of just looking in Hermione's head?"

Ron nodded. It would have been nice if Hermione could have handed them the solution, as she had so many other times, such as when she decided that they were going to make Polyjuice potion, but that wasn't going to happen this time, it had become painfully obvious. Harry also didn't think it would be prudent to tell Hermione what he and Ron were up to. Harry rose and went to his trunk. He took out *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Seven* and handed it to Ron. "Here, you check this." He dug further down into his trunk, deciding that the Dark Arts text probably wouldn't have a clock spell, nor the History of Magic text. The Potions text was clearly out. Then, at the very bottom, he found the book that Sirius had given him because he'd found out that Harry had a snake for a pet.

"I'll check this one", he said, settling down on his bed with *Sorcerers, Serpents and Snakes* by Colleen Colubra. Opening it, he saw again the inscription that Sirius had written: *Dear Harry — Happy Fifteenth Birthday! From your godfather*, and the illegible scrawl that seemed to contain something resembling an S and a B.

He and Ron had been reading for some time when Harry turned a page and saw just what he needed. "Ron! Look at this! C'mere, you. I've found it. We can use Sandy. I can put a spell on her..."

"What?" Sandy hissed at him from under his shirtsleeve, sounding slightly alarmed.

"Oh, don't worry, Sandy. Remember when I put an Engorgement Charm on you during the dueling? It's nothing, you won't be inconvenienced a bit", he said, directing this at his left arm.

"Perhaps *I* should be the judge of that..." she sniffed at him from under the shirt. Ron looked baffled.

"What are you two going on about? Are you going to tell me or not?"

"Right. See here? It's not a clock spell, precisely, but it does have a time element. You cast the spell to last a specific amount of time, and when it wears off —"

"I see. But — what's the spell actually do?"

"Let me see... I'm not really clear about that yet..."

He read some more, then realized what he had. "It turns the snake into a woman for a pre-set time period, up to a day." He grimaced at Ron, who shrugged.

"So?"

"So? You realize what this spell is used for, don't you?"

Ron looked blank for a moment, then, when realization dawned, his eyes were very wide. "I see", was all he could choke out.

Harry slumped again. "You're right, Sandy. You should be the judge of whether you want to help me", he hissed at her. "I don't want to subject you to being a woman if you'd rather not. And I don't know how we'd explain you to the other blokes..."

Ron looked like he was deep in thought. "She could hide under the Invisibility Cloak", he suggested.

"Let me understand this, Harry Potter", Sandy's unseen voice said to him now. "I would be a woman for a time?"

"Yes. So that you could wake me when the spell ends. I think that when you change back into a snake, even if you were asleep in your human form, you'd be sort of jolted. Then, being awake yourself, you could wake me. I'm sorry, Sandy. It's a stupid idea..."

"That is all I would have to do? When I turn back into a snake I wake you up?"

"Er — yeah."

There was silence. Ron raised his eyebrows at Harry as if to say *So? Will she do it?*

Even before Harry could ask, Sandy was hissing at him, "I will do it."

Harry took her out of his sleeve and held her before his face, gazing into her inscrutable eyes. "You're sure?" he asked her.

"Yes, Harry Potter. I am sure."

He swallowed. "All right. Now, this is a Transfiguration spell. Like when I change into a golden griffin. You've withstood that before."

"Yes. I trust you, Harry."

Harry swallowed. She had used just his first name. He didn't know what to say. Her simple statement had utterly undone him. "All right", he told her. "Let me check on everything I need to do to perform the spell."

According to the book, he was supposed to imagine a specific woman's appearance to give to the snake when in its human form. "A specific woman?" Ron asked.

"Seems like it", he answered, trying to imagine who Sandy should look like in her human form. It was certainly nothing he'd ever considered before.

"You realize", Ron said ominously, "that if you make her look like Hermione, I *will* have to kill you. You're forewarned. Oh, and if you make her look like Ginny, and she ever finds out, *she'll* probably kill you. Actually, if you do that, I'll also have to kill you."

"Ron! What do you think I'm going to do with her? She's still going to be Sandy, my snake! And have you forgotten why we're doing this?"

"No. I'm just saying... I mean, she *will* have to be in your bed, won't she? So that she can wake you when the spell wears off?"

"Yeah. I reckon", he said, feeling uncomfortable. "I'll make certain that I turn her into someone I'd never consider sleeping with, all right? Will that make you happy?"

"All right then. Lavender it is." Harry swatted Ron's arm, laughing. "Or did you mean Millicent Bulstrode?"

"Or Pansy Parkinson?"

"Or Professor McGonagall?"

They were laughing uproariously now, each suggestion more absurd than the last. Finally, Harry calmed down and looked at the book again.

"All right, we need to get serious here. Let me look at the incantation..." After some time, he felt ready to try it. He put Sandy onto the bed and backed up. He checked his watch; it was a little after eleven o'clock, so they wanted the spell to last for five hours. Harry took out his wand and tried to concentrate. He raised his wand and opened his mouth...

"So, who's it to be then?"

Harry clamped his mouth shut again. He'd lost his concentration. He turned to glare at Ron.

"If you must know, my mum." He couldn't explain. He just couldn't explain it to Ron. The most prominent images he had in his mind of his mother were of her when he was young, like the day at the seaside, or lying dead on the cave floor, or in the front garden at Godric's Hollow. He could see her alive at other times, in his Pensieve, but most of those memories weren't especially good. Reprimanding him in Potions class, or upbraiding him for fighting with Simon and Stuart. He just felt like he needed to see his mum looking at him without that cloud of disappointment behind her eyes, the eyes that, for years and years, saw only a future Death Eater when she looked at him, and even after she knew he didn't want to be that person, he was the one responsible for Stuart's death, and then he saw that thinly-veiled accusation behind her eyes instead...

Ron made a face. "I wouldn't much fancy seeing my mum without clothes..."

Harry's eyes opened wide. He stared at the small green snake, realizing why Ron had said this. He ran for his wardrobe, muttering, "*Damn, damn damn...*" while he searched for some clothes she could wear. He put a shirt, sweater and jeans on the bed, turned the blanket so that it was covering Sandy except for her head, and moved back into position.

"Now, Sandy", he hissed at her. "When you become human — you won't have any clothes on", he said, having trouble getting the words out. "I'll pull the curtains round the bed and you can put these on, all right? Do you think you can do that?"

"Is that why I am under a blanket?"

"Yes."

To Harry's relief, she didn't try to squirm out from under the blanket. Her slightly argumentative nature was starting to remind him of his sister, and he struggled to maintain his concentration. He tried to hold his mother's image in his head very clearly, pointed his wand at Sandy and said, "*Serpentigena per horam quinque effemino!*"

But — he couldn't quite hold onto the image of his mother, as they soon saw. When the smoke had cleared, He saw bright green eyes, just like his own, gazing through the haze. It took him a moment to realize,

however, that they weren't his mother's eyes, but his sister's. They could see, lying under the blanket on his bed, on her stomach, looking more than a little dazed, the image of Jamie Potter.

"It worked", Sandy hissed at him, lifting his sister's head and using his sister's mouth. She started to rise, but Harry put his hand on her back and pushed her into the mattress before he or Ron could see too much, then pulled the curtains around the bed hurriedly.

"You — you're supposed to put those clothes on now. Re-remember?" he stuttered.

"Yes, Harry Potter", she hissed.

He heard her rustling around then within the confines of the bed. It seemed to take quite a while, and before she emerged, the door to the room swung open and Dean, Neville and Seamus entered, yawning and tired. Harry and Ron whirled guiltily.

"What're you two up to, then?" Seamus said suspiciously, seeing the pair of them standing before the drawn curtains of Harry's bed. Then a hissing noise emerged from behind the curtains and the three boys who had just entered the room frowned.

"What's that, a balloon with a slow leak?" Dean asked. Harry had heard what Sandy said, but he didn't dare hiss an answer to her at this moment; he was somewhat self-conscious about using Parseltongue in front of others, anyway. He was starting to realize that she probably could not speak English. Then, to their dismay, Harry and Ron heard a thud as Sandy's bare feet landed on the stone floor on the other side of the bed. She came walking around it, hissing at him, "I do not understand these fastenings, Harry Potter. I am not accustomed to having limbs. Or digits. I require assistance."

She was wearing Harry's jeans, which were rather baggy and not buttoned, although Harry was glad to see that she'd gotten them zipped. She was also, thankfully, wearing the shirt, although she was holding it closed with her hands. It was obvious that she wasn't wearing anything under it. Seamus, Dean and Neville dropped their jaws.

Tunnels

Harry immediately whirled Sandy around and pulled her back to the far side of the bed, swiftly buttoning the open shirt (managing somehow to do so with his eyes barely open, since he hadn't been able to furnish her with a bra) and then pulling the sweater over her head and getting her arms into the sleeves. She was a bit awkward about managing her limbs, not surprisingly. When they came round the bed again, the facsimile of Jamie Potter, who was really a transfigured garden snake named Sandy, was wearing slightly baggy jeans, a white shirt and one of Mrs. Weasley's patented Weasley jumpers in a vivid shade of green that matched Harry's eyes (and his sister's eyes, as well).

Ron's ears were redder than he'd ever seen them, and Harry imagined that if he went to the wardrobe and looked in the mirror there, his own ears would match the Gryffindor decor as well. He smiled feebly at Neville, Seamus and Dean, who all looked very eager to hear how they were going to explain the girl in their room.

Harry decided to go out on a limb and tell the truth. Most of it, anyway.

"Um, you're probably wondering who this girl in our room is", he began slowly, speaking very clearly, as though they perhaps didn't speak English. Mostly, he was worried that it would come out as Parseltongue, but as he was trying to concentrate very hard on addressing the boys, and they didn't look baffled about his actual words, it seemed that they were hearing it as English.

Seamus crossed his arms and eyed Sandy in a rather annoying fashion. "You could say that, Harry. I don't even recognize her as a Hogwarts student, and she doesn't look old enough to be out of school. So she's either a witch from another country or a Muggle. Either way, you're in a bit of trouble, aren't you, *Head Boy*?"

For a moment, Harry wondered whether Seamus was trying to blackmail him, but he shook himself and went on with his explanation.

"Actually, there's a third explanation. The truth. I was practicing some spells from a book on doing magic with snakes. Sirius gave it to me after I got Sandy. Anyway, there's a spell to transfigure a snake into a woman, and that's just what I did. This is my snake, Sandy. That's why you heard us

hissing at each other. We were both speaking Parseltongue. You've seen her a thousand times. You've just usually seen her wrapped around my arm, or warming herself on the hearth downstairs."

Dean snorted. "She looked a hell of a lot different then. Smaller. Greener. Less hair. Fewer arms and legs."

Seamus also snorted in laughter, and even Neville joined in. Harry could see that Ron was stifling his own laughter and suddenly felt quite alone. *Blimey. I wish I had managed to turn her into my mum. They wouldn't be laughing at her...*

"You expect us to believe that, Harry?" Seamus said when he could speak again. "How do we know that when you're hissing at each other you're not — just hissing? How do we know you're speaking Parseltongue?"

"It's the truth. Wait a minute —" He turned to his bedside cabinet and picked up the heavy book with the snake eating its own tail on the cover. He showed the three boys the exact spell he'd used, and they had to admit that it sounded like he wasn't lying — the book was open to that page, after all. However, after reading about how to do the spell, Neville looked at Ron and Harry shrewdly.

"That's a pretty thick book. Why, of all the spells you could have tried, did you decide on *that* one?"

Ron and Harry glanced guiltily at each other, swallowing. Harry had even said to Ron, *You know what this was used for, don't you?* Clearly, even Neville had worked this out.

Seamus, Dean and Neville were now laughing fit to kill. "We wondered why you were so attached to that snake, Harry!" Seamus choked out, almost helpless with laughter. "How convenient to be a Parseltongue! You can chat up any girl you can conjure from a snake!"

The three of them were leaning on each other, tears flowing from their eyes, they were laughing so hard. Harry felt very, very annoyed, and resisted the urge to throw around detentions or deduct house points. The last thing he needed was for McGonagall to get wind of this. (Although it was possible that he might get points for a well-done and complicated Transfiguration, he somehow doubted that she would fail to work out the usual purpose of the spell also.)

"That's enough!" he finally bellowed. "I cast the spell to last five hours. Ron and Jam — er — Sandy and I are going down to the common

room to wait for the spell to wear off. Good night!"

He pulled Sandy to the door, her hand limp in his (did she not know how to use her mind to control her fingers? he wondered), and as Ron followed them out, he heard Dean say, "Weird. If I didn't know better, I'd say she's exactly what a sister of Harry's would look like."

"Maybe that's because Harry cast the spell", Neville suggested.

"Still — it's kind of weird", Dean said softly.

"Weird", Seamus agreed.

Harry groaned inwardly as they descended the stairs. If the other boys were saying anything else about this, he could no longer hear them, and he was glad that he didn't have Ron's super-sensitive werewolf hearing abilities. When the three of them reached the common room, it was deserted, for which Harry was grateful. He flung himself into a chair by the fire. Ron followed, and Sandy tried to, but she tripped over the rug and went sprawling.

"Ow", she groaned, as Harry and Ron helped her into an armchair.

"I am not accustomed to limbs", she told the two of them, awkwardly folding her legs under herself. "And having my eyes on the front of my head."

Harry ran his hand over his face after removing his glasses; he felt very weary. "Damn the three of them!" he said, then proceeded to use a number of choice profanities to describe what he thought of their interference. Harry put his glasses back on and saw that Ron was staring at both him and Sandy.

"What's the matter, Ron? I know, I know, you don't usually hear me using language quite like that... Somehow the occasion seems to warrant it... It isn't like *you* haven't got a foul mouth at times, you know..."

"You should hear what Harry says when others are not present", Sandy informed Ron. Ron's eyes went even wider. Harry frowned at him and wondered whether Sandy was going to make a habit of only using his first name. He wasn't used to it, and it sounded odd to him (although not quite as odd as looking at his sister and thinking of her as Sandy).

"What's with you, Ron? There's no way that you understood what she — "

"But that's just it, Harry! I *can* understand her! Everything she's said since we came downstairs has sounded like English!" His eyes were very round.

Harry looked at Sandy with his jaw dropped. "You can speak English!"

She put her hand to her throat. "I have a human's body, and it seems I can produce human speech."

"But you were speaking Parseltongue to me upstairs", Harry said, confused.

"You were speaking Parseltongue to me before that", she replied. "I was answering in kind."

Ron was shaking his head, smiling. "Wow! I finally get to hear Sandy speak. After all this time. Do you know what's going to happen soon?" he asked her eagerly.

She frowned. "I have the Sight because I am a snake, and all snakes have the Sight. But I am not in my snake form at the moment, so I do not know whether I have the Sight right now."

Harry was feeling even more irritated; now Ron was treating Sandy like a sideshow act. "How would you like it if I started talking to Maggie like that?" he said grumpily. "Bothering her morning, noon and night with, *'Read my fortune, Maggie, read my tea-leaves, Maggie, check out my aura, Maggie...'*"

Ron grimaced. "All right, all right. You've made your point. What are we going to do now?"

Harry leaned back in his chair. "I'm going to get some sleep. I'm tired enough that sleeping while sitting up will be no trouble. Sandy, when the spell wears off and you're a snake again, can you do something to wake me?"

"I am sure I can think of something. Would it be acceptable if I also go to sleep now?"

Harry smiled at her. "Yes, Sandy, of course." She actually seemed to slither down the chair onto the floor (Harry reckoned that she didn't know how to move like a human) and stretched out on the rug before the fire. "What are you doing, Sandy?"

She looked up at him with his sister's glittering green eyes. "Going to sleep. This is how I am accustomed to sleeping when I am in this room." Harry nodded; it was true. He'd put her on the hearth many times for just that purpose. "However", she added, "I am *not* accustomed to being warm blooded. I am feeling perhaps a bit *too* warm..." In a trice, she had removed Mrs. Weasley's handiwork, and started to fumble at the buttons of

the shirt. Harry was glad that she hadn't yet completely mastered how to use her fingers.

"No!" Harry cried out, jumping down onto the floor and putting his hands around her wrists so that she couldn't do anything. He glared at Ron, who had been watching her prepare to remove the shirt, his jaw hanging open again.

"Er", Ron said awkwardly. "Yeah! I mean — No! Don't take off the clothes." He sounded like he wanted to say this as much as he wanted to say, *"No, please don't give me a million Galleons and tell me I'm the greatest Quidditch player who's ever lived."*

"Thanks for your support, Ron", Harry said dryly.

"What?" Ron whined at him.

Harry frowned at Sandy. He had to keep reminding himself that she wasn't his sister. "All right, you don't have to wear this", he said, brandishing the pile of knitted green yarn. "But keep the shirt and jeans on. Okay? Otherwise — well, Ron and I could both get in quite a lot of trouble, and plus, I'd have to use that poker to blind myself, right after I beat the piss out of Ron with it." He tried to sound more light-hearted than he felt.

She frowned; she hadn't understood this kind of dark humor when she was a snake, either; she was ever the literalist. "Why would you beat your best friend, Harry? Why would you have to blind yourself?" She put her hand on his brow solicitously, and Harry felt alarmed and disturbed; she was suddenly reminding him of Jamie a great deal, and he had to tell himself sternly that she *wasn't* Jamie, that as much as he liked talking to Sandy sometimes, he couldn't quite talk to her in the same way he used to talk to his sister, and that they all needed to just get some rest.

"Never mind. I wasn't being serious. Well, not completely", he added, not wanting her — or Ron — to think that it would be all right for her to disrobe.

She curled up before the fire, her head on her arm, and soon he heard the sound of his sister's deep, measured breaths, the way he had been accustomed to seeing her in repose in his other life. It was so strange to have someone who appeared to be Jamie sleeping on the floor near his feet, and yet — so *not* Jamie.

Harry stared into the fire for a while; he'd thought he was exhausted, but now, suddenly, his eyes wouldn't close. He looked over at Ron, and he

wasn't very happy when he discovered that Ron seemed to be watching the way the clothing strained over certain parts of Sandy's borrowed body when she moved in her sleep.

"Hey!" Harry said softly, so he wouldn't wake her. "Put your eyes back in your head!" he whispered fiercely.

Ron jerked his head up. "Oh. I didn't realize you were still awake. I was just — *blimey*, Harry. You really had yourself a pretty sister", he said weakly. Harry grinned and looked at her fondly.

"Yes, I did. You made as big a fool of yourself over her in my other life, you know. I didn't put that in the Pensieve", he grinned, "but it was rather funny."

"Oh, I'm glad my appreciating a pretty girl is so amusing to you."

"Yes, and it might be quite amusing to Hermione, as well. Shall I go fetch her —?"

Ron started to get up. "No! No! Totally unnecessary!" Harry laughed. "You bloody sod", he grouched. "Don't do that."

Harry was still laughing. "Sorry. It's too much fun."

He and Ron stared at the fire silently for a few minutes, before Harry dared to ask him, "So — how are you and Hermione doing?"

Ron grimaced and stretched his long legs toward the fire. "She's not happy, Harry. I keep telling her that she shouldn't take it as an insult or anything, that we haven't — well —"

"Consummated?" Harry ventured cautiously, not entirely certain he should be prying, now that Ron was revealing this to him.

Ron nodded miserably. "Yeah. I mean — it's not as though I don't want her. She *knows* I do. And I realize it's frustrating for her too. She tried to lecture me about that. `Do you think it's just for the man, *blah blah blah*'. " He sighed. "But when I, er — " He looked uncertainly at Harry. "Okay, Harry — I think it'll be helpful to me to talk about this, but don't take it the wrong way if I look at the fire right now and not you, okay?"

Harry tried not to laugh. "Okay. No offense taken. What did you want to say?"

Ron gazed at the dancing flames. "Well, a couple of weeks ago — well away from the full moon — I — I offered to help her. With the — the frustration she's probably feeling. But she started to — well, to try to take things further, and I bolted. I'm just not ready for her to get me all worked up. Not that I don't start to get worked up when I'm getting *her* worked

up... I mean... I don't know what I'll do. To her. And it's getting close to the full moon, now. It's worst the day before, but it's progressively worse every day leading up to that. Right now, I feel pretty — agitated", he admitted, and Harry saw his eyes flick toward Sandy. "It's a pity *I* don't have a snake..."

Harry looked at him, trying to determine whether he was serious. "You'd better not mean that. Do you want me to pick up that poker right now and —?"

Ron laughed. "Get a grip, Harry. I was just joking. I just — I just feel so *crazed*. It's only been a few months since I was bitten, too. I don't know how Remus has put up with this month after month, year after year. I can't describe it. Feeling like you want to shag anything and everything — you may think you've felt that way since you were thirteen —"

"— well, I wouldn't go *that* far —"

"— but your typical teenage hormone-fest is nothing compared to this. And I *know* she would want to help me if she knew about it, which is precisely why I haven't told her. I'd lose all control and take her up on the offer, and then I'd probably lose all control while I'm with her and she'd land in the hospital wing..."

"Oh, come on, Ron, you don't know that. And you're right — she *would* want to help you. You really ought to tell her, even if she doesn't spend the night with you. She's *Hermione*. You know what she does; she hits the books. If she knew you had this problem, she wouldn't rest until she'd found a solution. A spell, or a potion or — something."

"Something like shagging me..."

"Ron! Give her some credit! She's been running for over two years, she's been learning karate since the beginning of the summer, and she's put herself through the physical rigor of Animagus training. There's a considerable amount of pain involved in *that*, let me tell you. She's tougher — physically — than you think. You don't need to act like she's made of bone china. You never know — she might give as good as she gets."

Ron's eyebrows flew up. "Are you saying that she — she ever got a little *rough* with you, Harry? Or asked you to get rough with her?" A split second later, his eyes opened wide in alarm. "Wait! Forget I said that! Bugger! I'm so tired I don't know what I'm saying. If I *ever* do that again,

remind me that you have been instructed by me, on pain of death, *never* to reveal anything that went on between the two of you physically..."

Harry smirked. "No problem. You don't think I would have *told* you, do you? Just because you asked? I'm not *that* stupid."

Ron started to smile at this too, but then the smile disappeared from his face and he said to his best friend. "Oh. My. God. If you and Ginny do get together, you — you'll eventually want to — to —"

Harry leaned back and groaned. He was afraid of this. "What's wrong, Ron? Train took a while to pull into the station?" Harry tapped his temple with his forefinger. "Are you shocked that I would want to do this? Or did you think that Ginny and I were going to be having knitting parties? At any rate, it's not like it's going to happen any time soon..."

"You're damn right. But we *are* trying to break up Draco Malfoy and my sister so you two can — can —" He sputtered to a stop, then ran his hand through his hair. "Bloody hell. Now you almost have me wanting her to stay with Malfoy."

"Oh, yes, that would be a brilliant idea. Then she could lose her will power again, as she almost did at the end of last term, and sleep with *him* instead of me."

Ron shot to his feet. "*What?* They almost — *what?*"

Harry shrugged, trying to be nonchalant. "She was excited about her O.W.L. results. They went to the greenhouses to celebrate — you figure it out. If Professor Sprout hadn't caught them in time —"

"*Sprout* caught them? Bloody hell, I have to make sure I send her a Christmas card."

Harry laughed at that, and then Ron had to laugh too, and sat again, shaking his head and running his hand through his hair some more. Then he froze. He lifted his head and sniffed, and cocked his head, clearly listening to something.

"You hear that?" he whispered.

Harry frowned. "Of course I don't, you prat. What is it?"

Ron cocked his head to the side again. "Someone's been listening to us", he whispered. "They're on the girls' stairs."

He crept toward the opening to the stairwell, and a moment later, Harry *did* hear something; he heard footsteps pattering on the stone steps, making Ron leap through the arched doorway and dash up the stairs after the eavesdropper. Harry ran for the stairs too, but he was far behind Ron,

not having his speed, and when he discovered Ron on one of the landings outside a dormitory, he stopped and whispered frantically, "*Do you know who it is?*"

Ron turned around, a dreadful expression on his face. He swallowed. "No", he whispered. "But I know what year they're in." He pointed with his thumb toward the sign on the door.

Seventh Years.

Now Harry swallowed. "C'mon, Ron", he whispered. "We — we should go back down."

When they were seated before the fire again, Harry tried to reassure Ron. "It'll be okay, really..."

"No, it won't, Harry! She knows now. Oh, god, she'll try to *help*..."

"Will that be so bad? So she tries to help? You'd think it was a *bad* thing for you to — to sleep with your own girlfriend when she wants this, too. Remus said —" he swallowed; "— he said it really calmed him down —" Harry tried not to think about the fact that it was sleeping with his own *mother* that had calmed down Remus Lupin.

"Do you think I want to — to *use* Hermione that way? *Oh, darling, time to do it, as it's that time of month for me.* Give me credit for being just a bit more romantic than *that*..."

Harry lifted his eyebrow at him. "Romantic? You? Oh, it was very romantic to sleep with Parvati after you were set off by those Ravenclaw girls..."

Ron ignored him. "And there's something Remus didn't tell *you* that he told me. I mean, he was embarrassed enough that you found out about that at all, and that Sirius found out the *reason* why he was sleeping with — with your mum..."

Harry frowned. "I thought Sirius didn't know before he overheard the two of you talking."

Ron nodded. "That's what I thought, too. No; he was saying, that he would have liked to pretend he didn't hear *that* — or I think he said something like that — because he was talking about the whole pre-full-moon madness. He didn't know that that was *why* Remus and your mum had originally — er — *done* it."

"Oh", Harry said simply, wondering how his godfather could have kept from him for the previous three years that his mother had slept with Remus Lupin while they were in school. Then again — he hadn't told him

that she'd been Snape's girlfriend, either. He'd found that out from Snape himself. "So, you still haven't told me what did Remus told you."

Ron sighed and glanced at Sandy. "He hurt her. When they — when she helped him. The first time, he bit her and bruised her. He almost always scratched her up pretty badly. And once he — he broke her leg."

"He *what*?"

Ron nodded, miserable. "He was pretty upset about it, he said. And she forgave him. He felt even guiltier about *that*... He wasn't trying to scare me or anything. Okay, maybe he was a little. For my own good. And Hermione's. So I'll *think*, so I'll be *careful*. I don't want to hurt her, Harry. And I could. Really badly."

"That's why you have to tell her about this. So she knows what she's getting into, or she can go into research mode. Let her be who she is: *Hermione*, queen of preparedness. Don't shut her out."

Ron looked even grumpier. "Yeah, well, because of her listening in on what we were saying, she knows now..."

Harry shrugged. "How do you know? She might not have been out of the dorm for that long, or she might have been going to check on a first year or something. She might not have heard us at all. She can't hear as well as you, remember."

Ron didn't look convinced. "Trust me; in the morning, she'll be acting *funny*. She can't not give away that she knows about this. She's dreadful at that sort of thing."

"Just do me a favor, Ron, all right? Don't be cross with her and don't have a row over this. Let her tell you she knows. And if *she's* cross with *you* for not telling her straight out — just take it. Apologize — as difficult as I *know* you find that to do — and get on with your lives. This shouldn't be the roadblock you've let it become."

Ron made what Harry thought might be a noise of assent, leaning back with his eyes closed. Harry finally closed his eyes as well, hoping that his two best friends would be able to work things out, and before he knew it, something sharp was digging into his ankle, making him cry out in pain. His eyes flew open and he looked around, surprised to find himself sitting in a chair by the common room fire; he'd forgotten he wasn't sleeping in his own bed. There was a white shirt and a pair of jeans on the hearth rug, and Harry looked around in panic. *She'd gotten undressed!* He swallowed, seeing that Ron was still asleep. *Bloody hell. She just doesn't get it.*

But then he noticed that the shirt on the floor appeared to be buttoned still, and he felt another sharp pain on his ankle.

"Ow!" he said this time, bending over to look down, finding Sandy looking quite like herself again, a small green garden snake. She'd found a way to wake him. He hadn't realized she had such sharp teeth, as she wasn't a carnivore. (She was an insectivore, which wasn't quite the same thing.)

"Wake up, Harry Potter", she hissed, evidently having decided to go back to using his first and last names. He checked his watch before picking her up, then held her before his face.

"Thanks, Sandy. All of the trouble about us having a strange girl in the dorm aside, this does seem to have worked. It isn't four thirty yet and you've woken me up in time to do what I need to. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Harry Potter. It was rather interesting to be a human for a little while, but I think I am glad to be a snake again. It is what I know."

Harry nodded. And he'd been a snake for a while — a Slytherin — but now that he was a Gryffindor again, he felt much more comfortable. It was what he knew.

"Right. I can put you on my arm again, if you like. To keep you warm."

"Thank you, Harry."

There was that first name again. He tried not to reveal to her that this disconcerted him. He let her wind around his upper arm and then left Ron sleeping in the armchair while he crept up the stairs to the dorm, to get his map, since he'd forgotten it earlier in his haste to get away from the other boys. When he returned, he shook Ron until he woke.

"Wha —? Harry? What the hell —?"

"We're going to find out what Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner are up to, remember?" he told his sleepy friend. Ron yawned hugely and rubbed his eyes with his large fists.

"Oh. Yeah. Right." One word sentences seemed to be all Ron could manage at the moment. His eyes were half-lidded and his beard had grown ridiculously thick over the few hours he'd been sleeping. He appeared to be waking from a winter-long hibernation.

Harry looked at the map carefully, trying not to let his eyes close from weariness. There were a variety of dots moving on it — the people who were on for the third shift — and then he saw that there were two dots

moving in the Slytherin common room labeled Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner.

"There they are!" he said, feeling more awake now. They watched those dots travel through the dungeons and up the stairs to the entrance hall, where they were to report for duty. Harry checked his watch and noted that they were right on time — slightly early, even. The collection of dots milled around the entrance hall for a while before dispersing; the people from the third shift returning to their quarters, and the people on the fourth shift proceeding to fan out to patrol the castle corridors.

Harry and Ron saw Draco and Mariah go up the stairs to the library. ("Figures they'd pair off", Ron mumbled.) They walked back and forth along the corridor outside the library, as though trying to *appear* to be patrolling, then went back down to the entrance hall, after which they descended the stairs to the dungeons.

"Blimey!" Ron said, indignant. "They're going back to their house! They're going to duck their patrol shift!"

But Harry noticed that they took a turn that didn't go to the Slytherin common room; he knew it didn't because he'd actually lived there for almost six years, whereas Ron didn't pick up on this, having only been there once, when he was disguised with Polyjuice Potion.

"No, they're not", Harry told him, pointing at their route. "They veered off here."

They watched the moving dots some more as they proceeded through the maze of the Hogwarts dungeons. "Where are they going?" Ron asked, frowning. A couple of times, Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner appeared to be moving through solid walls; they were walking through passages that were not marked as passages.

And then Harry remembered, when he and Ron and Hermione had been bound to the trees in the forest and they didn't yet know that Malfoy was laying an elaborate trap for his father, Draco had said, "*My dad was already in the castle, waiting down in the dungeons. He let us out... you aren't the only one who knows secret passages out of that place...*"

"Of course! This could either be a passage my dad and the others didn't know about when they made the map, or else it was created by someone *after* they made the map. If they made the map in fourth or fifth year, this passage could have been made as early as their sixth or seventh year. It's a way Slytherins probably use to get out of the castle. Of *course* they'd have

ways to sneak about... they're *Slytherins*." Harry wondered why he didn't remember these passages from being a Slytherin himself, but he reckoned it was possible that the difference in the time lines may have meant that a crucial person who knew the secret didn't pass it on to the younger Slytherins at some point, and knowledge of the tunnels was lost.

Ron nodded grimly. "You're right, Harry. It makes perfect sense."

They continued to watch the dots move through what appeared to be solid walls, and then, through what appeared to be solid earth outside the foundations of the castle. "Must be a tunnel", Harry said, watching intently. The tunnel seemed to be leading to a spot near the lake; Harry could only judge the route it was taking by the movement of the dots, as the passage wasn't charted on the map.

"Huh?" both he and Ron said in unison when the dots appeared to be *in* the lake.

"That must be a pretty deep tunnel", Ron said, "to go *under* the lake."

They stared and stared at the map, and at length, the dots were under the earth by the shores of the lake again. Draco and Mariah stayed there. And stayed there.

"What are they doing? Do you suppose they're —"

"I don't know", Harry replied, swallowing. Ron paced, his hands combing his hair again.

"I wish they weren't in a damn tunnel. I wish I could just go over to the window here and look out, and know what they're —"

Ron froze, staring out the window at the grounds. Harry frowned. "What?" he asked his suddenly-silent best friend.

Ron said, "Be right back", rather abruptly, before sprinting up the boys' stairs. Harry walked to the window where Ron had been and couldn't believe his eyes. "Here", Ron said breathlessly, practically making Harry jump; Ron had been both swift and silent, and he was now thrusting Harry's Omnioculars at him, raising his own pair to his eyes and adjusting the focus. Harry lifted his as well, and now he saw, much more clearly, Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner by the edge of the lake. When he'd thought they were underground again, they were actually on the shore.

They were just finishing taking off their clothes.

"Blimey!" Ron exclaimed, never taking his eyes from his Omnioculars. "It's bloody cold out for that, don't you think? Although I reckon they

could have put a warming charm on the area where they are. Like when Hagrid had that golden griffin here. And — oh, my —"

Harry wondered whether he'd missed something important now. He scanned the area around the two Slytherins. "What? *What?*"

"Oh, it's just that — you can tell Mariah's a runner. I mean, that she — she tries to stay fit..." Ron swallowed. The Omnioculars seemed welded to his hands and face.

Harry resisted the urge to threaten to tell Hermione about this comment, as he also found himself (despite his original intent of being dispassionate and clinical about this exercise) mentally cataloguing Mariah's physical charms and didn't feel like having Ron threatening to tell Ginny. He couldn't have cared less about Draco Malfoy; Mariah was *far* more interesting... Harry also swallowed. He kept his Omnioculars trained on them so that it would record them and provide proof of what they were up to (he told himself). But as he watched Mariah and Draco, finally seeing them do what he'd suspected they'd been doing for some time, it seemed that his heart was beating very loudly. His head was pounding along with it. He noticed that Ron's breathing had become ragged, and Harry reckoned that if he tried to remove the Omnioculars from Ron's face, he would wind up being put through the wall by a very upset werewolf.

Abruptly, Mariah and Draco stopped kissing and touching each other and stood, picking up their wands and waving them over their clothes. The garments leapt into neat bundles, and appeared to have a sheen on them, as though they'd been encased in some clear waterproof material. Each bundle seemed to have two long ribbons attached to it, and, still naked under the three-quarters moon, both Draco and Mariah put their arms through the ribbon loops and walked toward the water holding hands, wearing the bundles of clothes on their backs, as though they were going hiking. Harry and Ron were shocked when the pair leapt into the water, which was sure to be nearly freezing. Some bubbles rose to the surface where they had jumped, but their heads did not reappear immediately.

"What the hell are they doing?" Ron exclaimed before Harry hushed him. He sounded far more upset about not being able to see Mariah anymore than about the possibility that the two Slytherins could catch their death swimming in the frigid water. Then something occurred to Harry.

"Wait a minute, Ron. Where do you suppose the tunnel brought them up to the surface? First they were underground, then under the lake, then on the shore of the lake. Are there any bushes near the shore? Something that could conceal an opening to a passage?"

Ron scanned the landscape again. "Not really. Not where they were, anyway. There are some rocks and shrubbery farther along, though."

They were silent for a while. Harry checked his watch. They waited some more, one of them always watching the water. Harry checked his watch yet again. He swallowed. "Ron. I think we'd better go find the patrollers. Especially the teachers. Or maybe I should just go straight to Dumbledore..."

"Why?" Ron said, still looking through the Omnioculars.

"Because it's been over five minutes since I checked my watch the first time after they went into the lake, and it was at least three or four minutes before that that they jumped in. They've been in there for almost ten minutes, and there aren't bubbles rising to the surface anymore, like when they first went in. We need to *do* something."

Ron finally tore his eyes away from the Omnioculars and checked the map. "Snape and McGonagall are on."

"Really?" Harry asked, checking the map. "It's supposed to be Sprout and Vector. Oh, well. I suppose the students aren't the only ones who change shifts. Where did you see them?"

"Here, by the library. Wipe the map and put it in your pocket."

"Right", Harry agreed. In a half-minute, they were out of the portrait hole and sprinting toward the library. When they arrived in the corridor they wanted, they spotted Professors McGonagall and Snape about to descend the stairs to the entrance hall.

"Professors!" Harry cried out breathlessly. They whirled in surprise. Professor McGonagall looked very concerned.

"Potter! Whatever is the matter? Are you taking Weasley to the infirmary?"

"No, Professor", he panted, trying to get enough air into his lungs. "We — we were awake in our dormitory —" His eyes slid toward Ron's, so he'd know to back him up on this. "— and I happened to walk to the window for a drink of water from the pitcher, and I saw —"

McGonagall stepped toward him, concerned. "What?"

Harry swallowed. "Mariah Kirkner and Draco Malfoy jumped into the lake. And they didn't come up. We waited and waited, but it's been nearly fifteen minutes now, maybe longer..."

Snape actually grew paler, and Professor McGonagall looked horrified. Without a word, they turned to the stairs and started descending rapidly, Ron and Harry right behind them. Snape had already opened the heavy front door of the school and they were all about to run outside when a familiar voice behind them made them freeze.

"A bit cold for that, isn't it?" came the laconic drawl. "Are we patrolling outdoors now, as well?"

They all turned in surprise. Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner were standing at the top of the dungeon stairs. Snape gave Harry and Ron a sharp look and pushed the front doors closed again. Harry gawped at Malfoy and Mariah. *They were alive!* But — *how?*

McGonagall's mouth had gone very thin and Harry didn't like the way it was twisting about one bit. "How is everything, Mr. Malfoy, Miss Kirkner?" she asked them, one eyebrow raised.

Draco Malfoy shrugged. "We were down in the dungeons. The Slytherins seem to be behaving themselves at the moment, you'll be glad to know, sir", he said to his head-of-house. "Thought we'd check upstairs next."

Harry's jaw dropped. "But — but you jumped in the lake! The pair of you! We thought you'd drowned!"

Malfoy looked at Harry as though he thought he was mad. "Um, having a little trouble telling your dreams apart from reality, Potter? Or should I say *fantasies?*"

Harry turned, wide-eyed, to McGonagall and Snape. "It's true! They — they —" he sputtered, realizing that he couldn't say in front of McGonagall that they were using the Marauders' Map to track Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner. If it had just been Snape, he would have, as Snape knew about the map, but with McGonagall present...

She raised an eyebrow at Harry and Ron. "Yes? Do you have anything remotely plausible to say concerning why you two are out of Gryffindor Tower? Because it is starting to appear that you were out of bounds, learned that Professor Snape and I were nearby, and to avoid discovery, decided to feign an emergency." Her eyes looked back and forth between them, peering over her square-rimmed spectacles. "Please tell me if there

is a legitimate reason for your being here, as Mr. Malfoy and Miss Kirkner both appear to be in the pink of health, as well as being dry as bones." They were not, however, even close to being as dry as Professor McGonagall's comments, Harry thought.

Then he took a good look at them; there wasn't a drop of water on them, and even their clothes were immaculate, not remotely creased, as they would be after being bundled up. Harry caught Mariah's eye, which he saw had quite a mischievous glint in it. She gave him a half-smile and ran the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip.

She knew he'd been watching.

Suddenly, a very clear mental image of her body leapt into his mind, and he felt himself grow warm and redden. Professor McGonagall took this as an admission of guilt.

"I don't know what you've been up to, but Head Boy or not, I cannot make exceptions to the rules." She sighed, as though she'd dearly love to, but had no choice; she looked at Snape out of the corner of her eye. He had his arms crossed and was looking triumphantly at Harry and Ron, just like when they were younger and he'd caught them in a bit of rule breaking. "It does *not* appear", McGonagall continued, "that Mr. Weasley needs to go to the hospital wing, as I thought might be the reason for your being out of bounds, and no one else seems to be having a medical emergency either—" she added, glancing at the Slytherins.

"— Although when I die, Potter, I'll make sure you're the first to know—" Draco Malfoy added with a smirk that faded as soon as Professor McGonagall gave him that gimlet eye. He cleared his throat for a moment and let her continue.

"— so I have no choice. Twenty house points will be taken from each of you for being out of bounds, and detentions will be arranged. Now — I will personally escort you up to Gryffindor Tower and I don't want you to come out of there until the last patrol shift is over. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Professor", Harry and Ron said in unison. Harry noticed that Ron had been very, very quiet since Malfoy and Mariah had shown up. Now he saw that Ron was looking at Mariah with narrowed eyes, but this time it didn't seem lascivious. His nostrils were flared as well, and Harry saw the wolf's red glow in his eyes. Harry wished Ron was like Maggie and could project his thoughts into other people's brains; he would have given all the Galleons in his Gringotts vault to know what Ron was thinking. Then

Harry noticed Snape looking at Malfoy and Mariah rather suspiciously, and he wished that *he* was the one escorting them upstairs, so he could speak to him privately, let him know about the map, about the secret passages in the dungeons. Harry had no doubt that he'd believe him and Ron. But that would have to wait.

When they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, McGonagall turned to them; she'd been utterly silent while walking upstairs. "I don't know why the two of you were wandering about at this hour, but I should think you would both want to be well-rested for your practices today, and for your match tomorrow." She smiled indulgently now. "I know that no matter whether Wales or England win, you will both make us all proud", she added quietly. Harry felt very small. *Some Head Boy I am.*

Harry and Ron said goodnight to her and reentered the common room. They picked up their Omnioculars from the windowsill and climbed wearily up to their dormitory. Seamus, Dean and Neville were snoring peacefully behind their bedhangings. Harry and Ron fell into their beds without disrobing or pulling the hangings closed, and Harry fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

The dreams started not long after he fell asleep...

He was swimming in the lake during the second task... Mariah Kirkner and Draco Malfoy were the ones tied up and being held hostage, though, not the four who were under the lake during the real task. He tried to untie them, but he couldn't loosen their bonds, and when he put his hands up to his neck, his gills were gone, and he felt his lungs swiftly and painfully fill with water, while they grinned at him and laughed and laughed, bubbles emerging from their mouths, their eyes wide with mirth...

He awoke, gasping for air, as the morning sun shone in the windows of the tower room.

* * *

"Forty points?"

Harry and Ron sank down in their seats at the Gryffindor table. Hermione's cheeks were quite pink. "I can't believe that when you were

both supposed to be getting a good night's sleep, instead you were out of bounds and busy getting forty points taken away from Gryffindor. You're not in first year anymore, Harry. You're Head Boy now —"

"But Hermione —" Ron started to say.

"And you!" she said abruptly, turning to him.

"What?" he said, a defensive tone in his voice. Hermione looked like she wanted to hit him and kiss him at the same time. She turned back to her plate and stabbed some eggs rather viciously. Harry was feeling a bit off his food and had a full plate that he'd merely picked at.

"Oh — nothing", she bit off, sounding like she had quite a lot to get off her chest to Ron, but that she hadn't quite been pushed to the breaking point. Harry wasn't sure Ron would want to be around when she did reach that point.

A number of students around the Great Hall seemed to be looking in Harry's and Ron's direction, giggling and pointing. Orion Pierson was sniggering behind his hand and then whispering something to a boy sitting next to him, making Harry wish he wasn't Sirius' nephew, so he wouldn't feel guilty upbraiding him for being rude. The seventh-year Hufflepuffs were red-faced with laughter, and Hannah Abbott seemed to be making *kissing* faces at him before turning to her friends, who were hooting and squealing uproariously. *Lovely*, he thought, *and she's a prefect, too*. The Slytherins looked very smug about something whenever he glanced their way, and the Ravenclaws looked even more superior than usual, and yet also highly amused about something he'd evidently done, as they were all breaking into grins when they noticed him glancing their way. *What's wrong with all of them?* he wondered. He understood the other houses being gleeful about Gryffindor losing points, but that didn't explain why the first year Gryffindors were in convulsions, nor why the other students in his own house were also looking like they were going to burst. He met Ginny's eye for a minute, and was surprised to see that she was looking *embarrassed*, instead of being in convulsions, like the other students. She turned deep red and looked away from him, pretending to be interested in something Ruth was saying. Ruth met his eye then, and a secret smile tugged at the corner of her mouth; she looked like she was trying very, very hard not to laugh.

Harry ignored all of them, bending over his plate to speak to Hermione across the table, *sotto voce*. "Hermione — we probably should have told

you what we were up to last night, but I want to fix that now. Hurry and finish, then come with us so we can tell you how we got forty house points deducted. I think we need your brain to help us work out a bit of a mystery."

She brightened a bit at that, and Ron gave him an approving smirk. The way to get on Hermione's good side: flatter her brain. And making a groveling apology for any misdeed was also usually a good move.

The three of them sat in the anteroom off the Great Hall after breakfast, Harry and Ron taking turns explaining the problem with getting Ginny to personally witness some misdeed of Draco Malfoy's so she'd have to break up with him out of pride. Then they explained why they'd turned Sandy into a woman...

"Oh, yes! I nearly forgot about that when I heard about the forty points. It's all over the school this morning, you know. Neville, Dean and Seamus started telling everyone as soon as they came downstairs." Harry groaned; that explained all of the tittering in the Great Hall. "Apparently you two were still sleeping after your nocturnal jaunt. What is this spell?" she asked grumpily, with a glance at Ron. "The wizarding method of not having to go out and buy inflatable dolls?"

Both Harry and Ron flushed. "She looked like my sister Jamie, if you must know", he informed her. "Although practically no one in this life knows about Jamie, so I can't very well explain, 'Oh, I was missing my sister and thinking about her when I cast the spell...' It wasn't like I was about to *do* anything with her, even if I weren't interested in Ginny, and even if she looked like someone else. Especially as she's really *Sandy*. What do you take me for?"

Hermione waved her hand at him impatiently. "Yes, yes, you have a point. It's just that — well it *does* look very bad, Harry. You can't deny that."

He grimaced. "I know, I know." He wondered how soon the hubbub about that spell would die down, and whether any teachers would get wind of it.

Ron's eyes narrowed now, looking at her. "You're saying you didn't know about this until this morning, when the other blokes came downstairs and told everyone? You weren't on the girls' stairs last night eavesdropping on us while we were talking?"

Hermione looked very confused. "Eavesdropping? Last night? I slept the night through. What are you talking about?"

Ron was looking at her very intently. Then he turned to Harry with a sigh of relief. "She's telling the truth."

Harry shook his head in wonder. "How do you know?"

"I can see when the blood vessels around a person's eyes are carrying more blood. I can sense in general the way a person's blood is flowing through their body. That's what happens when someone's lying — the thing about the eyes. And there's no change with her."

Hermione put her hands on her hips. "First — stop talking about me like I'm not here. Second — where on earth did you learn that?"

Ron shrugged. "A Muggle magazine I read when Remus and I went into London to register me as a werewolf. They have medical magazines in the reception area — Muggle ones — so it doesn't look suspicious, in case any Muggles wander in off the street. They can't use Muggle-repelling charms on the office to keep them out because a number of werewolves *are* Muggles. It was a very interesting article, about how Muggles are trying to create these machines to work out where people's blood is flowing when they're doing various things, like complex calculations or singing or lying. When they're lying, it turns out that it goes to the blood vessels around the eyes. Almost as good as Veritaserum, sounds like, if you have a good way to detect that that's where the blood's gone." Hermione looked at him in amazement.

"Wait", Harry said suddenly. "We're getting sidetracked. So — if Hermione wasn't the one eavesdropping on us, who was?"

Ron shrugged. "That leaves Parvati or Lavender. Whoever it was ran into the seventh-year dorm."

"Did you hear anything last night, Hermione? Hear one of them get up and leave?" Harry asked her.

She widened her eyes and shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. In the night, one of us will usually get up to use the loo. But not always. I was dead tired last night. I don't know if one of them got up or not."

"Oh!" Ron cried. "I almost forgot, Harry. Last night, Malfoy and Mariah were *definitely* lying."

"No surprise there. Blood vessels around the eyes?" Harry asked.

"Not only that, but they smelled of the lake. Very strongly. And they smelled of something else, too..."

"What?"

Hermione and Ron both looked at him as though he was daft. "What do you think, Harry?" Ron said. "They reeked of sex."

"Oh", he said softly.

"Poor Ginny!" Hermione said. "Explain to me again why she won't break up with him, when she doesn't love him, wants to be with you, *and* she knows he's cheating on her?"

Harry sighed. "She's afraid he'll go running off to serve Voldemort and try to kill me", he said in a monotone. Hermione nodded.

"And well she might be. This *is* Malfoy we're talking about. Someone who thinks nothing of putting his own father in prison, even if he *did* richly deserve it."

"But he *can't* love her", Ron said, running his hand through his hair. "He's shagging Mariah. He's a bastard and deserves whatever he gets."

"Yes", Hermione reminded him, "but Harry doesn't deserve to be killed just because Malfoy is cheating on your sister. Don't be stupid." Ron bristled, but she went on. "At any rate, it sounds like you two should curb your nocturnal ramblings for a while. I'll see whether I can manipulate both my own schedule and Malfoy's and Mariah's in order to get something incriminating on them at a time when *I* have *permission* to be out of Gryffindor Tower", she said pointedly. "In the meantime, you might find this interesting, Harry. My parents sent it in the owl post this morning."

She handed him an article cut from the *London Times*; it was about Rodney Jeffries. All sorts of people were interviewed about how much they loved him, from priests to doctors to members of Parliament and several European royal families. Scotland Yard — once investigating him — was even providing protection to Jeffries free of charge. Harry shook his head. There was something not right about this. He wondered now why Jeffries had healed him in St. Mungo's... Perhaps it had merely been to get Harry on his side? Or perhaps he thought Harry *would* tell people who had healed him, hoped there'd be some good publicity to come out of it. Harry was glad now that he hadn't told anyone. He'd originally thought Jeffries sounded very well-meaning and altruistic in the letter he'd written to Harry, but now he had a rather uneasy feeling at the thought of anyone knowing about that. He thought about telling Ron and Hermione, but decided it wasn't the right time.

Once "time" crossed his mind, he checked his watch. "Ron — we have to go. We need to get our gear and meet Sirius and Remus in the entrance hall in half an hour."

"While you two are off flying about chasing Quaffles and catching Snitches, *I* will do something useful and try to figure out where those tunnels are that you say Malfoy and Mariah used", Hermione said. "Where's the map now?"

Harry withdrew it from his pocket and handed it to her. Then he whirled in surprise as a very smooth and familiar voice said from the doorway, "Good. I was half afraid that you had lost that, Mr. Potter, although it *does* explain why you assumed that Miss Kirkner and Mr. Malfoy were in danger early this morning."

Snape stood in the doorway, his deep voice slightly amused. Harry stuttered. "Oh, I — I'm so glad you're here, Professor! I wanted to tell you last night, but —"

He held up his hand. "I knew you would not frivolously run about the castle claiming that someone was in danger. When you lie to cover up your rule-breaking, you are not usually very good at it, but you never invent emergencies, I'll give you that", he added, making Harry flush. "Plus — Miss Granger may need some assistance from someone who is intimately acquainted with the dungeon passages..."

Ron looked a little hostile about this. "You're going to be wandering around the dungeons with Hermione, looking for secret passages?" Harry wasn't sure whether it was bothering him because Hermione was his girlfriend or because Snape was, technically, his older sister's boyfriend. Harry had the impression that Ron would have been far more comfortable going back to the way they'd all thought of Snape when they were younger, as some sort of evil neutered Potions-teaching machine.

"Well, Miss Granger and Miss Dougherty and I." Ron looked like he was breathing a little easier, having heard that. "It seems — prudent — to have someone with your older sister's talents along."

Harry nodded. "Right. Good idea. But may I ask sir — why?"

Snape fixed him with an intent gaze. "Mr. Malfoy has a charm on him which could very well make him the most useful weapon the Dark Lord has. And I am not completely certain where Miss Kirkner's loyalties lie, except that they undoubtedly lie with Miss Kirkner — *if* she is controlling her own actions..."

Harry's eyes opened wide. Of course! Lucius Malfoy had put girls under Imperius to try to control Harry — Voldemort might have had someone put Mariah under Imperius to try to control Malfoy! On the other hand, that might mean that Malfoy wasn't completely responsible for his actions, which made it harder for Harry to condemn him... *Damn*, he thought. *If he turns out to be blameless...* His thoughts were whirling about this new and unwelcome thought.

Damn.

"If there is a way for either of them to leave the castle undetected, I believe I should know about it, for security reasons. Don't you?" Snape added, raising an eyebrow.

Harry nodded again. "Good point. Well", he said, not really wanting to leave now, "Ron and I can go off to Quidditch practice knowing that the question of the tunnels is in good hands." He gave Snape a small smile, feeling inordinately rewarded when one corner of the Potion Master's mouth lifted in an *almost* smile.

"I'll take that as a compliment, Mr. Potter. You should go to meet Remus and Sirius now, the pair of you", he said brusquely. "You might also want to inform *them* of what the three of us will be doing. In addition, I will tell the headmaster, and then he can tell Professor McGonagall what is occurring, and that I am to oversee your detentions", he added, nodding at Harry and Ron. "That will give us additional time to study the question of the tunnels, if we do not learn all we need to today, and since you will be under my supervision, if anyone else comes across us, you will have adequate alibis this time." Snape turned to look at Hermione impassively.

"Miss Granger — wait for me here. I will go to fetch Miss Dougherty."

He left immediately, his robes billowing out behind him, and Hermione stood to kiss Ron on the lips and Harry on the cheek. "Have a good practice, both of you, and don't worry. Leave it to us to find out how they left the castle."

"Too bad *you're* going to be in the dungeons with Snape and Maggie", Harry told her, smirking. "They may try to find a way to shake you after a while. Use tact; if it seems like they want to sneak off to snog, try to think of a good reason why you have to excuse yourself..."

Ron was aghast. "That's my sister you're talking about!"

"Sssh!" Hermione hissed at him, even though they were the only three in the room. "That's not supposed to be common knowledge, remember?"

"Snogging *Snape*", Ron said with disgust, making Hermione and Harry exchange amused glances; Ron had never been in Snape's Pensieve and seen Harry's mother with Snape in the dungeon and under the oak trees that used to grow near the greenhouses. "Are you trying to make me get sick right before a practice?"

Harry and Hermione laughed, and they were both still laughing as Harry dragged Ron from the room so they could get their equipment and prepare to meet each other on the field of battle.

* * *

Harry hadn't been so tired and sore since the day he had tried out for the Welsh team. At least the Bludgers were being hit away from him by his team's Beaters now. The final practice before the match had been a scrimmage with the witches of the Holyhead Harpies, the current League champions. For this, Erica Welsh had played in the Seeker position on the Harpies; Harry had grown to like Erica quite a lot, and Owen as well. The two of them were both very sweet together and perfectly able to set their marital relationship aside and be quite businesslike (which sometimes meant quite antagonistic) at a moment's notice. And yet — their marriage didn't seem to suffer at all for this. From what Harry could tell, it was largely through Erica's connections that they were able to get the Harpies to come in to give them some formidable practice before the match with England. He'd caught the Snitch three times during the practice and Owen was convinced he was ready for the match. Erica had studied the style of the English Seeker and had tried to imitate him as much as possible, so that Harry would know what to expect. She'd caught the Snitch twice.

When he and Sirius arrived back in the Hogwarts entrance hall just in time for the evening meal, Harry thought it was quite possible that he could eat everything that appeared on the Gryffindor table. Unfortunately, that would mean fighting Ron for all of the food; he seemed to have the same sort of rigorous practice experience Harry had had. Harry couldn't help feeling that that didn't bode well for the Welsh team. He grimaced while shoveling his food in, watching Ron's face as he chewed nonchalantly. He and Ron had already agreed that there would be no hard feelings no matter whose team won, but the fact remained that only one team was going on to the quarter-finals.

Suddenly, a shriek rent the air in the Great Hall, rising even above the normal hubbub of meal-time. Harry turned in alarm to see Pansy

Parkinson run screaming from the Slytherin table, her hair afire with magical purple flames. Quicker than thought, Will Flitwick, who was at the far end of the Gryffindor table with the other third years, and closest to Pansy, cried, "*Fluvius!*" and sprayed her head with a stream of water from the end of his wand. By the time Harry reached them, Will had turned off the water, and Pansy was a sopping mess, her singed hair clinging to her head, making it look rather small and accentuating her piggish turned-up nose.

"What — what happened?" Harry asked her, perplexed.

Pansy screamed in frustration. "It's — it's that *Mudblood harpy* again, *that's* what happened!" she cried before turning on her heel and stalking out of the Great Hall, probably to go to the hospital wing. Harry turned to see where she was pointing, and saw —

His Aunt Petunia.

He groaned inwardly.

"Thanks, Will", he said to the younger boy, who nodded and gave Harry a small two-fingered salute before rejoining his friends at the Gryffindor table. Harry thought that perhaps he would suggest to Snape that they relax the rule about the Dueling Club being for fourth years and up; Will seemed to be very good at thinking on his feet, and Harry hadn't been especially happy with the new students who'd been trying for the open positions since the term had begun in September.

He walked to the Slytherin table and stood next to his aunt; she was eating with an ersatz air of calm. There was a no-man's-land around her where no other Slytherins sat. She did not acknowledge Harry's presence.

He cleared his throat in a vain attempt to get her attention, and when that failed, he put his hand on her shoulder lightly and said, "May I speak to you, please?" He didn't especially want to call her "Aunt Petunia" in front of the Slytherins, so he didn't call her anything at all.

He glanced up at Snape, at the head table, and received a small nod; he didn't want to deal with his new middle-aged student (she was older than he was), and was glad Harry was taking her in hand. Harry hoped he *could* take her in hand. It was very, very strange how the tables had turned; all of his life, she'd had ultimate power over him, the exception being when his uncle was making them all drive across the country to avoid his Hogwarts letters — even Aunt Petunia had had no control over the situation then,

Uncle Vernon being utterly in control of the family's movements — and yet completely out-of-control at the same time.

She looked up at him with a rather surly expression in her eyes, and Harry was jolted by how much it reminded him of his mother. She'd never reminded him much of his mother when he was younger, except when she was singing to Dudley — but then, he hadn't really known anything about his mother, and now he had fifteen years of memories of her, memories of growing up with her and being disciplined by her, of fighting with her and making up with her. His aunt rose and followed him out the door of the Great Hall.

"Aunt Petunia", he began in a low voice, once they were standing in the entrance hall; "did you set Pansy's hair afire?" He felt it wisest to get straight to the point and not beat around the bush.

She practically pouted. "That girl is the stupidest little ninny I've ever had the displeasure to know. If she doesn't have her hair set on fire more often, she'll be completely insufferable by the time she's twenty."

Harry sighed, remembering the Pansy in his other life trying to get her father to consider Harry for a job in his department at the Ministry, so she could be near him. "Look, I'm not the biggest fan of Pansy Parkinson either, but there are a couple of things to consider. First — trying to keep Pansy from being insufferable is probably a lost cause." He couldn't stop himself from smirking just a little, realizing that he and his aunt probably actually agreed on something — a general dislike of Pansy. "Second — even if someone *is* incurably insufferable, you can't just go about setting their hair on fire. I don't care how many people you dislike — and you're probably going to dislike a lot of Slytherins, as most of them aren't at all fond of Muggle-born witches and wizards — you can't just curse or jinx or hex anyone you please. There are *rules*."

"And you know what I told you last time, Mrs. Dursley", Hermione said sternly. Harry started; she was standing at his elbow and he hadn't heard her enter the hall. "I told you that the next time the consequences would be more dire than a scolding."

"What you told her *last time*?" Harry said to her, bewildered. "This has happened before?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Don't you read those parchments I put by your plate every day at breakfast? What do you think they're *for*?"

Harry swallowed, embarrassed. "Oh. Sorry. I thought they were just revised patrolling schedules or something."

"That's in there, too. But student incidents are also catalogued. You're supposed to know what's going on, Harry."

He was even more embarrassed now, and could see a smug glitter in his aunt's eye. That galvanized him into action. "Well", he said to her, "you heard the Head Girl. Not just a scolding this time", he said, trying to sound ominous, and instead sounding to himself like a small child play-acting at being a grown-up. He looked at Hermione out of the corner of his eye, seeing her mouth the word *detention*.

"This time, it means a detention!" he said to his aunt, as though he'd just thought of this himself.

"A Detention!" his aunt exclaimed, evidently not having paid any attention to Hermione. "I'm a forty-three-year-old woman! I'm to have a *detention*?" she said indignantly. "And *you're* the one giving it to me?" she added, as though the animals had put all of the zookeepers into the cages at the zoo.

Harry lifted his chin resolutely. "Yes. At our last Herbology lesson, Professor Sprout was asking for volunteers for repotting the Mandrakes again. I think I'll tell her she has a new volunteer — *you*." His aunt scowled in a way that was not at all becoming. In fact, he thought, she looked rather like traditional Muggle depictions of witches when she did that. "I'll tell Professor Sprout that she is to have the help she needs, and she will tell you when to report to the greenhouses. Is that understood?" He did his best to make his voice very stern now.

She backed down from her defiant stance just a little. "Crystal clear", she said sharply, her tone also like cut crystal. She turned and walked up the marble stairs to the staff wing with an imperious air, and Harry knew it was going to be an uphill battle to discipline her.

Hermione patted his arm sympathetically. "You did all right, Harry. I don't know what I'd do if I had a disagreeable relative suddenly show up here with magical powers. But *do* start reading the parchments I give you, all right? I'm not writing out this information for my health."

He looked at her sheepishly. "Yes, ma'am", he replied, unable to keep the corners of his mouth from turning up. She punched him lightly on the arm.

"Listen to you. There will be plenty of opportunity to make me feel like an old woman in thirty years. You don't need to start before we're even out of school."

Thirty years. Harry wondered for a moment where they'd all be in thirty years. *Where will we all be in one year, for that matter?* There were times — especially during the Triwizard Tournament — when he wasn't completely certain he'd even survive school. He grinned at Hermione; he was tempted to tell her she was being awfully optimistic to think he'd be alive in thirty years, but he didn't do this. Instead he repeated the "ma'am" in a mischievous sing-song all the way back to the Gryffindor table, and when they sat down to eat their puddings, she suddenly flicked her hand toward Harry's lovely piece of apple pie, turning it into — a steaming pile of rotting tripe. Harry paused with a forkful of the stuff just in front of his open mouth; he thought he was going to vomit, but he swallowed and put his fork down, pushing the plate away. Orion Pierson, Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown were sitting across from him, and they recoiled as the plate of tripe came nearer to them. Orion even stood and backed away from the table, turning green. Harry turned and peered around Ron at a very smug-looking Hermione.

"Didn't you hear me say to her that you can't just hex anyone who displeases you?" he said, feeling a bit irked, as he'd really been looking forward to the pie.

"Oh, did I hex *you*?" she said in mock-surprise. "I though I hexed *your pie*. It's not exactly the same thing, now, is it?" she added with wide-eyed innocence before turning to eat her bread pudding.

Ron helped himself to a slice of cake, shaking his head at the pair of them. "I don't know... Is it going to be up to *me* to get the Head Boy and Head Girl to behave themselves? Who would have thought, six years ago, that of the three of us, I'd be the one most likely to be mistaken for an *adult*?"

But that thought was so ridiculous that everyone in hearing range suddenly erupted into laughter, and with a mouth full of cake, Ron looked about at them all, saying, "*Wha* —?" in such a thoroughly bewildered way that it only served to further fuel their laughter. Even the greenish Orion was laughing, and at the Gryffindor table, dinner ended in general hilarity.

* * *

Hermione had switched Harry's patrol schedule so that he would be on the second shift with Mariah, in place of the Ravenclaw fifth-year, Tamara Katz. He wouldn't be starting until eleven thirty, so he had ample opportunity to tell Ron and Hermione, sitting around the fire in the Gryffindor common room, about what Sirius had told him when they were traveling to and from Wales for his Quidditch practice.

Harry had started off showing Sirius the article from the *Times*, but Sirius had put up his hand to stop him, saying, "Look at the photograph."

Harry peered at the picture accompanying the article; he no longer found Muggle photographs very interesting, since they didn't move, and he hadn't really paid it much attention. Now he saw that a dark-haired man standing not five feet away from Rodney Jeffries, in a crowd of admirers, was Sirius himself.

"That's you! But what —"

"I'm only teaching part-time, Harry, remember. What do you think I've been doing with myself? There are two other operatives keeping an eye on Jeffries, as well. I have to tell you, though, so far, he seems too good to be true. It's also true that there's a magical signature in the area every time he's done a show; it's like he's activating all of the magical genes in *everyone* who's coming to see him, but in a sort of benign and *generous* way. I can't describe it. He makes everyone feel better about themselves, and people who are ill feel better as well, but from what I can tell, they're sort of making *themselves* better, he's releasing a power in them so that they have control over their own bodies in a way they didn't before. Maybe he's causing their bodies to secrete a certain hormone or something. I don't know what he's doing, precisely. We haven't encountered any more situations in which he's creating more wizards and witches, like your aunt. Technically, since Muggles look on what he's doing as an article of faith, the Ministry isn't classifying it as magic, as something that needs to be covered up with Memory Charms. Apparently there *are* Muggles who've done similar things in the past, without *technically* performing magic. There are things about it in the archives at the Ministry. And he genuinely seems to be helping people..."

Harry had nodded, his lips drawn into a line. It would have been a perfect time to tell Sirius about Jeffries healing him at St. Mungo's, but since he still suspected Jeffries of being up to something, he refrained from doing so. How could he justify being suspicious of someone who had

healed him? He felt petty and small for not being full of gratitude to Jeffries and singing his praises at every turn, as his Aunt Petunia tended to do, but he just couldn't bring himself to do this. He still thought there was something very not-right about Jeffries.

"You're not being — being taken in by him, are you?" Harry said cautiously. Sirius looked thoughtful.

"I'm not sure that's how I'd put it. I'm not completely convinced the Ministry *shouldn't* be concerned, so we're observing him and trying to determine his motivation, but I have to say, Harry, that I'm starting to suspect that he's the least of our problems. We still need to get access to Gringotts and bring some life back to Diagon Alley. There's a very real danger at this point that the wizarding economy will never recover from the Diagon Alley attack. Dumbledore has some other people working on that problem, but I'm starting to feel like I'm on a bit of a holiday when I'm watching Jeffries, when I could actually be doing something useful if I were working on the Gringotts project." Harry had no response to that; he knew as well as anyone that the inflation in the wizarding world had hit crisis levels and that most people were buying anything they could from Muggles with Muggle money these days, instead of from wizards using wizarding money.

"And what's this I hear about you turning your snake into a girl because you're desperate, Harry?"

Harry groaned. "That's not why. Look, it's all your fault anyway. You're the one who gave me that book about doing magic with snakes."

Sirius laughed out loud. "My fault! Who told you to turn your snake into a girl? And anyway, you've had that book for nearly two-and-a-half years and never got into trouble with it before."

Harry rubbed his hand over his face wearily. "I never cast any of the spells in it before..."

Hermione was able, in turn, to tell him and Ron about what she and Maggie and Snape had discovered about the tunnels in the dungeons. "We found it!" she said excitedly, her face glowing in the firelight as the two of them leaned in so she wouldn't have to speak very loudly; they were all sitting on the hearth rug, very close to the fire. "It's *amazing*. We followed it clear to the edge of the Forbidden Forest; it comes up above ground about fifty yards from Hagrid's, under that fallen chestnut tree that's been rotting away all these years."

"How do you get the tree off the exit, then?" Ron wondered.

"It's not really *on* the exit, it's obscuring most of it, though. And it's really like a rabbit warren down there. We could have been quite lost for ages if Maggie hadn't been leading us through. She just had these premonitions about which way we should go. We also used the Four-Points Charm more than a few times, to work out where we were. Terribly confusing. And there are times when it looks like a dead end but it really isn't; the continuation of the tunnel is around a sharp corner or under a hole in the wall that's obscured by a stone..."

Harry was shaking his head. "That may explain how Lucius Malfoy got Draco and Ron out of the castle in our fifth year, but that can't be the tunnel Draco and Mariah used last night. The tunnel they used didn't go near the forest; it looked like it went under the lake."

She shrugged. "Well, as I said, there's a huge network down there. The one they used must be one of the other branches we didn't take. We're probably lucky we found our way out again. The three of us were late to lunch and had to go to the kitchens for something to eat. We wanted to talk, in private, though, so we went up to Maggie's rooms with the food." She looked at Ron mischievously. "But you were right, Harry. Eventually, they *did* look like they wanted me out of there, like they wanted some *privacy*, so I pleaded massive amounts of revision and left them alone. *In Maggie's rooms*," she added for emphasis, grinning at Ron.

Ron had put his fingers in both ears and started singing the Chudley Cannons' fight song rather too loudly. Harry grabbed a cushion he was leaning on and threw it at Ron.

"Shut up, you. She's just winding you up", he grinned.

Hermione shook her head. "It's *far* too easy, you know", she said, still grinning herself. But then she and Ron had these *looks* on their faces that suddenly made him feel like *he* was in the same room with two people who wanted him to disappear...

There wasn't anyone else in the common room now, so he excused himself, going up the stairs to the dorms, stopping on the landing outside the third-year dorm. The door was open and the boys were playing Exploding Snap. Harry thought that looked like a good opportunity to engage in an activity that wouldn't let him fall asleep, and he popped his head in, asking whether he could join them. Will grinned and invited him in, while the other boys looked nervous. *Harry Potter, the Head Boy, was*

going to play cards with them. After a while, though, they had relaxed and were even teasing him for the end of his nose being slightly singed. They were, however, all yawning by eleven o'clock, and Harry suggested they turn in. Will smiled and nodded at him before he left, and Harry went back down to the common room.

Ron was in a chair near the fire. Hermione was curled on his lap, her eyes starting to look heavy-lidded as she gazed into the fire. Ron was fast asleep, snoring loudly. She lifted her head in surprise when she saw Harry.

"He's been asleep for about twenty minutes", she whispered. "Totally knackered, poor thing", she added, pressing her lips to his brow before standing. "I'm surprised you're still on your feet."

He shrugged. "I have to be, don't I, if I'm to patrol with Mariah and try to get her to tell me about the tunnels, or her and Malfoy, or *something* remotely useful." They woke Ron with some effort so he could go up to the dorm and sleep in his own bed. Harry thought Hermione looked at him lying in his bed somewhat wistfully before she kissed him goodnight and left. Harry looked longingly at his own bed before leaving the dorm again; if he took a short nap, it *wouldn't* be short, he knew, and he had to be downstairs to patrol in less than half-an-hour, with Mariah Kirkner.

As he walked down the stairs and corridors to the entrance hall, an image of her from the Omnioculars came unbidden into his brain; although Hermione had been quite uninhibited at times when they were still having a physical relationship, Mariah was — well, she was the most sensual thing he'd ever seen, and he was growing increasingly unsure that anyone in their right mind could blame Draco Malfoy for not resisting her...

Professors Sprout and Trelawney had been on the first shift; McGonagall and Sinistra were taking over. Trixie Lewis and Ernie MacMillan turned up next, to sign off for the night, followed by Draco Malfoy and Tony Perugia. Mariah was already there, and Harry saw Malfoy glaring at her. He spoke to her softly while the other newcomers entered the hall, Kurt Harrison from Ravenclaw and Robert Jensen, from Slytherin, both fifth years.

"*I thought you said you were switching to the first shift*", Harry thought he heard Malfoy say to Mariah, his lips barely moving. Harry realized that Hermione must have told each of them the wrong thing, so they wouldn't

be on together again, allowing Harry to get Mariah alone to pump her for information.

"*I thought you were switchin' to the saicont*", she replied, twirling her hair nonchalantly, looking at Professor McGonagall as though fascinated by her. Harry wasn't certain that her lips had moved at *all* (although it took him a moment to realize that she'd said "the second"). She wore those soft leather fingerless gloves on her hands again. Harry realized that, for all that he'd been wondering about those gloves, when he'd seen her in the Omnioculars without them, he hadn't exactly felt moved to refocus on her hands, look at them in close-up so that he could learn the reason for the gloves. He had, unfortunately, been somewhat distracted by the rest of her body...

"I'll patrol with Mariah", Harry told Professor McGonagall, who now knew about the reason for Harry's alarm the previous evening. He jumped in before he could be paired up with one of the fifth years. McGonagall nodded at him. Mariah looked at Harry, her eyes glittering with — *what?* Harry had seen that look before, in Hermione's and Katie's eyes, and when Alicia had cornered him in the Quidditch changing rooms to ask him to the ceilidh... For that matter, Mariah had looked very much like that when *she'd* asked him to the ceilidh, and when he'd encountered her in the corridor to the girls' Slytherin dorms in his other life. He had only one word for it:

Lust.

Harry swallowed. He felt his pulse racing as he recalled how difficult it had been to pull away from her, when he'd been standing near her in her thin nightdress. He shook himself as he followed her up the marble stairs, more images coming into his brain, images from the night before, Mariah writhing in the heat of passion...

Stop it, he commanded his brain. *I love Ginny, I love Ginny*, he thought repeatedly. *That's the point — to get her away from Malfoy...*

But it was becoming increasingly difficult to remember that that was the point of the exercise when he was near her, his head spinning, his body rebelliously responding to her presence. Harry practically shook from the war being waged within him, a war for control and dominance. The trouble was, he was starting to think that there was no way for him to lose, that no matter what happened, he'd come out a winner...

More than an hour had passed, and they were in the corridor leading to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, where Remus Lupin had taught him to conjure a Patronus and Barty Crouch put him under Imperius and he learned that he was stronger than that, that he —

He couldn't take it any longer; his head was screaming that he had to have her, that he had to touch her, and he grabbed her shoulders, whirling her to face him, wondering if this was how Ron felt on the night before the full moon. Before he could say or do anything, however, she had taken one look at him and smiled triumphantly, taking his sweating hand in her cool gloved one and dragging him after her.

"Come with me", she said simply, as though he could do anything else, as though he wouldn't follow her to the ends of the earth. They went down, down, down into the dungeons, then along the passages that Hermione had told him and Ron led to the tunnel they'd taken to the forest. He thought he would throw her down on the ground at any second as they wound through the tunnels, but he went on, following her, unsure how many turns they'd taken or where they were going. The important thing, he thought, is that he was with her...

Finally, he heard an odd, watery sound in the passage ahead of them. There had been magical torches on the walls the entire time they were in the tunnels; the torches sprang to life as soon as they moved to within about twenty feet. Now he saw that the walls of the tunnel they were in had a strange light reflecting on them. The walls were damp stone, and the light danced on the stone in a peculiar way, making Harry frown. When they turned the corner, he saw the reason for the odd light; they were in an underground cavern which was a hidden entrance to the lake. He could see that the cavern ended about thirty feet away, a wall of stone that went down into the water. They were in a kind of air bubble with an underground harbor, the water lapping at their feet. Harry had no doubt that if they went in and swam past the stone wall, they could then go up and up until they reached the surface of the lake, outside in the frigid autumn night.

That was how Malfoy and Mariah ended up back inside the castle, he knew now. They jumped in, then swam to this cavern and walked back to the castle through the tunnels, after putting drying spells on themselves...

Then, through his fog, he remembered the amulet. He remembered that she'd said something about her brother...

"Is this how he did it?" he choked out, almost blind with desire. "Your brother? How he got the amulet out of the lake?"

She turned, opening her robes slightly to reveal that she was wearing a diaphanous dress under her school robes which hid her body very poorly. Harry's mouth went dry. If she was trying to distract him, it was working...

"Aye. Munro was able to come doon here ta do it. No one had to see'im oop on the shore..."

"But", Harry said, his head in a fog, feeling like he was swimming through a haze, "how did he breathe? How did *you* breathe, and Draco, when you were in the lake last night?"

She smiled seductively at him, and he felt like fire was coursing through his body — in a good way. "It's a family cairse, connected to the amulet. Everyone in the family gaits it, but it's only passed on by the women..."

He was confused now, and wasn't sure whether it was because of how she was making him feel. There was sweat dripping down his face despite the cold, and his palms were damp and clammy. His senses were overwhelmed by her presence. He'd never felt quite like this before. "How is it a curse if it helps you to breathe underwater?" he said with some effort. "And — and what does the amulet have to do with it? It — it's *cursed*?"

But then she was putting her arms around him, and all he knew was that she was kissing him, or he was kissing her, or that they were devouring each other, his mouth open so wide that his jaw hurt and he didn't even care, she was liquid fire in his arms, her clothes were dropping away as though they were made of mist. Nothing mattered, just getting to her skin, getting down to his skin, touching and kissing her everywhere, feeling her lips and hands on him...

You don't want this. Not really.

His mind was only vaguely aware of this thought amidst the jumble of thoughts about desire and Mariah. But it was there.

She's not Ginny.

Harry pulled away from her suddenly, scrambling backwards over their pile of clothes. *When had that happened?* he wondered. *How had that happened?*

Sandy was the only thing he was wearing, and she wore only her fingerless gloves. He looked at her, still wanting her dreadfully, but

suddenly, he had a very bad feeling about it. *I have felt like this before*, he remembered, *but I was only fourteen, and my hormones weren't so — awake — and I'd never been with a woman... but I do know this feeling...*

"What are you?" he choked out, desperate to do anything to prevent it progressing further, yet feeling more like he was fighting himself than her. "A veela? A siren? Are you part mermaid? What are you doing to me?" It was like being under Imperius — except that every time he'd been placed under Imperius, he remembered, he'd known it was going to happen. He'd been prepared, and he'd fought it — even the very first time, he'd fought it. With the veelas, he hadn't been prepared, but he hadn't been as mature as he was now, either, and while it had affected him badly, it wasn't anything like the way he was being affected now...

He also remembered that someone under Imperius who is being told to do something they *want* to do has a nearly impossible time of fighting it, they lose all of their inhibitions...

No, he thought stubbornly. *I don't want her. I just —*

He'd been doing so well... He hadn't thought about *that* much at all, hadn't dwelt on his physical relationships with Hermione or Katie, and he'd been the one to pull back that night in the common room, when he found that Ginny hadn't taken the potion... For a seventeen-year-old boy he'd shown remarkable restraint and fortitude. And then, last night, he'd seen Mariah by the shores of the lake, he'd seen the moonlight bouncing off her body...

He was sweating and shaking again. *Damn damn damn. I know everyone in school thinks I'm a pervert because of the snake-into-woman spell, but I really don't want to do this...*

"You shall be strong."

He blinked; Sandy's voice was like a bucket of cold water crashing down on his head, and he had never been more grateful in his life. *You shall be strong.*

He almost wept in relief; it was so good to hear her voice, to hear some words of assurance. *Thank you, Sandy*, he thought. He would be sure to give her profuse verbal thanks later.

Mariah knelt before him, putting her hand on his brow, touching his scar, something almost no one ever did. Even though her chest was practically in front of his face, he found that this was calming him, and as she looked into his eyes and stroked the jagged pink skin, he gradually felt

more in control, even though they were both still without their clothes. His head suddenly felt remarkably clear, no longer clouded with lust. *She's pulling back*, he thought. *She's doing it on purpose. Why?*

"Ssshh", she said softly, still stroking his brow. "Calm down, so I can tell ye a story." He looked into her dark eyes, feeling lost in their depths, but he no longer had the sensation of his heart running away with him, he no longer felt like he would throw her down and attack her at any moment.

"All — all right", he whispered, his throat tight. "But — can we do this with — with our clothes on?"

She smiled warmly at him and waved her hand; her own clothes flew to her and she was very quickly clothed. Harry took a little longer, pulling on his trousers and shirt, not bothering with his tie, which he just draped around his neck. She leaned back against his chest, her body warm against his, as she began to tell her story, and he couldn't bring himself to push her away. Instead, he let her rest comfortably against him and he put his arms around her waist, his cheek on her hair, closing his eyes and breathing deeply, willing himself to stay calm as she wove her tale.

After a very little while, he no longer seemed to hear her accent... it was as though he was back in his other life, and spoke this way himself, with the lilt of Scotland, the sound of the Highlands; it was also the sound of the islands in the windswept north, where the sea was as black as obsidian and as cold as deep space...

A thousand years ago, the four greatest witches and wizards of the age fled north from persecution to found a school for young witches and wizards where they could learn about their abilities and hone their craft far from prying eyes and free of the peculiar prejudices of Muggle society. Here, in the Grampian Highlands, they found a beautiful valley with a glistening loch and a young forest nearby. They built a castle, very simple at first, with no moat but the loch and no defenses but their magic, and a village grew up nearby, where those who worked on the castle lived with their families. The Founders named their school Hogwarts, and named the village Hogsmeade. They sought out magical children from all over Britain, bringing them to the school to learn about who they were and what they could do. The population of the school grew and grew as they

found more and more magical children, and the population of Hogsmeade grew as well, as more and more witches and wizards learned of the refuge in the north where they could be safe and live peacefully.

The forest offered only a light barrier, however, between the school and the Muggles who lived on the other side of the forest, and soon all four of the Hogwarts founders had met Muggles whom they loved and wanted to marry. Rowena Ravenclaw and Helga Hufflepuff had fallen in love with two brothers; they were wed in a double ceremony in the newly-erected village hall, and the entire village of Hogsmeade turned out to celebrate with them, as well as many Muggles from the other side of the forest. The party lasted for a week. At the celebration, Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin met twin sisters, childhood friends of the grooms. Each fell in love with one of the sisters, and soon another double wedding was being planned.

Gryffindor had a wonderful idea for gifts for their brides; they would each commission the village smith to fashion a protective amulet, a gold alloy for Gryffindor's bride, a silver alloy for Slytherin's.

The gold-colored amulet would be in the form of a golden griffin, which was Gryffindor's Animagus form and the reason for the surname he had taken; no one in his family had previously borne more than one name. When the wearer clasped the amulet, a feeling of calm would come over her, and she would feel her courage increase and know that she was loved.

The silver-colored amulet would be in the form of a basilisk, the king of snakes, as Slytherin was a Parselmouth and bore a snake on his coat of arms and as the symbol of his house, at the school. In addition to the feeling of love and calm that would come over the wearer of the amulet when she clasped it, Slytherin enchanted the metal of which the amulet was made so that, if she was truly in love with someone, she would be able to see that person clearly in her mind's eye, and know that he was safe — and faithful. He never wanted his bride to wonder whether he truly loved her, nor whether he was safe while traveling around Britain, seeking out students under the noses of sometimes-hostile Muggles.

The smith worked on creating molds for the amulets; Slytherin's would be carved with magic from the blackest, hardest rock that could be found, and Gryffindor's would be carved from the purest, hardest white marble. No human tools could carve with the precision of magic, no Muggle craft could begin to approximate the beauty of the work executed by the wizard smith. When it was time to pour the metal into the molds, Gryffindor put his magic into the gold metal, and Slytherin enchanted the silver metal, and when they had cooled, the smith opened the molds to reveal two perfect amulets, two perfect gifts for their brides.

Gryffindor presented his gift to his betrothed, and she loved it, but her sister was jealous; Slytherin had not given her the amulet he'd made for her yet, so she thought he wasn't as fine a catch as Gryffindor. Plus, she had wanted to be with Godric Gryffindor when the sisters had first met him and his friend, but she had settled for Slytherin. Even though she had agreed to marry Salazar, she still pined for Gryffindor, believing that her sister had made the better match, and when she saw the beautiful golden griffin amulet he had given her, she formed a plan to win him from her sister.

While her sister slept, she took the golden amulet from her and put it on, and went to see Gryffindor in his quarters at the castle, a luxurious suite draped with red hangings and warmly lit with magical torches. She seduced him, but he believed her to be his betrothed, as she wore the amulet he had given her. However, Slytherin had still not given his betrothed her amulet; he had been quite taken with it when the stone was opened and its craft was revealed to him. He had taken to wearing it himself, holding it tightly whenever he wanted to see his beloved, the woman he was to marry. He still planned to give it to her, but he wanted to wait until their wedding night.

The night that his betrothed met Gryffindor and seduced him, he held the amulet as he lay in his bed, and he saw the two of them together, saw them coupling against the blood red background of Gryffindor's suite. He knew it was not her sister he was seeing, even though they were twins; the amulet would only show him the woman he loved. He vowed vengeance on both her and Gryffindor, who had been close as a brother to him. He did not tell his bride or his friend what he knew.

More than month went by, and the morning of their wedding day dawned. Slytherin went down to the shore of the loch with the black stone and the amulet; he held it one last time, seeing the woman he still loved. However, now he also hated her. It is possible to both love and hate the same person, you know. Weeping for a life he would never know, he put the amulet back into its stone mold and sealed it with magic, then flung it deep into the loch. He spoke to some water snakes and told them what it was, and asked them to tell the merpeople to look after it and to someday give it to someone who needed it, at their discretion.

He went to the village hall with Gryffindor; they were both arrayed in their wedding finery, and their brides were waiting for them. However, after the brides' father brought them to be wed, Slytherin had just reached for his wand, to wreak his vengeance, when his bride brought the proceedings to a halt and demanded that they speak in a side chamber, just the four of them. They moved to the chamber, and she revealed that she had a mark of passion that Gryffindor had left on her neck just a fortnight earlier, when she'd gone to him again. As they had already coupled, and she claimed that she was carrying his child, she said by rights she should be the one to marry Gryffindor.

Godric Gryffindor and his intended bride were shocked; he had had no idea that it wasn't his betrothed who had shared his bed, and she was furious with her sister for stealing her love. She admitted that she hadn't come to meet him, to sleep with him, that it must have been her sister, even though to lie would have put an end to it. She and Godric both knew that he should do his duty and marry the mother of his child, so, weeping, they both accepted their lot and agreed that Gryffindor would wed Slytherin's bride and Slytherin would wed Gryffindor's.

However — Salazar Slytherin had another idea.

"Duplicitous Muggle!" he roared at his betrothed. "I saw you with him! I used the amulet which you shall never have; it is now at the bottom of the loch. But do not think you are getting off so easily! As you have had two faces in this affair, so shall you have two faces evermore, and your children, and your children's children, until the end of the world!"

And he cursed her and changed her. Gryffindor and his bride were appalled; her sister wept over her, even though she had betrayed her and tried to steal her husband. For flopping on the floor at their feet was a sleek brown seal, in deep distress at the lack of water around her.

Slytherin left.

Gryffindor and his bride took her poor sister up north, keeping her as wet as possible on the way, and released her into the sea, which was now to be her home. The couple returned to Hogsmeade and wed quietly, and Gryffindor continued to run the school with the other two other Founders. Slytherin did not appear at the school for many months, although he regularly continued to send students to the school. However, in his travels around Britain, he only sought out magical children whose parents were also magical. Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff finally noticed this and summoned him back to the castle to discuss it.

They insisted that the school should take all magical children regardless of whether their parents were magical, but Slytherin declared that all Muggles and their children were untrustworthy and in turn didn't trust magical people, so it would be far safer to keep them out of Hogwarts. The others disagreed vehemently; after all, each of them had wed a Muggle. Only Slytherin had been betrayed by one.

The school returned to admitting magical children from all backgrounds, but Slytherin knew he could not tolerate this any longer, and he finally left. Legend says he went to France, but no one knows for sure, and those tales belong to another story, another time...

More than ten years later, a mysterious woman accompanied her son to the school after he received a letter inviting him to study at Hogwarts. She remained at the castle for the sorting ceremony, and saw that he became a Gryffindor. Godric noticed the lone, hooded figure standing in the rear of the hall, and he asked his wife to go to her and offer her a place at their table. When his wife reached the woman, she threw back her hood and revealed that she was the twin sister who had been cursed by Slytherin. The two sisters embraced in joy, for Gryffindor's wife thought she was never to see her twin again.

"The curse has been lifted!" she said to her sister in delight. But her sister shook her head.

"No. I am still cursed, and my children, too. But the curse is not what you think it is. He did not change me into a seal, but a selkie. I have never ceased to have a human's mind, even as I swam in the cold sea and fled from whales and sharks and the spears of men.

"But sometimes, I felt the need to shed my sealskin and stretch my legs on the shore, to walk as a woman once again, and one of these times, when I was close to giving birth to my son, a man who knows about these things found my selkie skin and took it, and by so doing, he took my soul and I was enslaved to him.

"However — what he did not realize was that he was actually my slave. A selkie can make men do things that a mere woman cannot. I had a power over him that even he has never suspected. I am empowered to do almost anything except make him give me my skin and my freedom back.

"So, we wed. And soon after, my son was born, the son of Godric Gryffindor. There he sits, in his father's own school, as he should be, and now that I have returned what I have stolen, I give him into the care of his father and relinquish my rights to him. I have a daughter who carries my curse and shall give it to her children as well, and I must return to her. Tell my son that I love him, but now it is his father's turn..."

And with that, she left. Her sister could not convince her to stay. She gazed at her nephew, who looked like the son she might have had with Gryffindor. They were happy; they had three healthy daughters. But she knew men, and they were rather silly about wanting sons. Well — now her husband had one.

She went to her husband and told him that it was his own son who had come to the school at last, and he wept for joy, and then sorrow, when his wife told him of her sister's life as a selkie held prisoner by her husband. They raised the boy, having him live with them even during school holidays, and the son of one of the other founders, Rowena Ravenclaw, was one of his best friends.

After he finished school, he and his friend traveled north, to see his mother, whom he missed. He hadn't seen her since he started school at Hogwarts. He had written to her by owl post and she had

written back with directions. When he and his friend arrived, his friend was immediately smitten by Gryffindor's half-sister. She fell in love with him as well, and did not need to be enslaved, but gave him her selkie skin of her own free will, which meant that she could also leave whenever she wished. When a selkie gives her skin of her own volition, out of love, she is not owned.

Young Gryffindor enjoyed visiting with his mother and sister; he used his own selkie skin to swim in the sea with his sister, having never known the freedom of leaping through the wild waves in the open sea, just the tame loch at the school. He knew, however, that unlike his sister's children, his would not be selkies, for only the daughters in the family would carry on that curse from generation to generation.

He left his friend there to wed and live with his sister, but before he left, he broke into his stepfather's secret hiding place and stole back his mother's selkie skin for her, freeing her. He swam with her back to the mainland, and his sister and best friend waved to them from the shore, about to begin their new life together.

Their children were, of course, magical, having a wizard for a father. When their children were old enough, they sent them to Hogwarts, and it is a peculiar thing that, in this family, for generations afterward, all of the boys were sorted into Ravenclaw, but all of the girls became Slytherins, and were known for their cleverness and womanly wiles. In each generation, there was at least one girl, so the selkie traits were guaranteed to be passed on again and again and again...

Slytherin's curse lives on.

She sat up, and Harry stared at her. He noticed now how large and dark her eyes were; he'd thought they were enormous before, but he hadn't quite comprehended how the darkness almost entirely filled them, how there was almost no white to be seen, like an animal's eyes. *Like a dog. Like Fang, or even Dunkirk. And like a seal.*

He had no words, but just kept staring at her, his throat paralyzed. Finally, she looked down at her own hands and said, "Haven't ye aiver wondered about me gloves, Harry?"

He nodded, looking down at her hands. "Many times." *What was she getting at?* he wondered. "Why — why do you wear them?"

He'd finally asked, so she slowly pulled them off, her fingers long and slim and pale in the torchlight. Then she held up each hand, palms facing him, and slowly spread her fingers apart, the torchlight shining through the delicate webbing binding each of her fingers to its neighbor.

Steps

Harry looked in wonder at Mariah Kirkner's webbed fingers.

"Do ye know where I hail from, Harry?" Mariah asked him, her large dark eyes boring into his. He was only vaguely aware that she had spoken; concentrating now, he realized what she had said, and he nodded.

"I think so. The Orkneys, isn't it?"

She frowned. "Say *Orkney*. Or the Orkney Islands. Fer sainturies, me family's lived on the Isle of Roussay. Do ye know what *Orkney* means?" He shook his head. "It's Norwegian fer *seal island*. Orkney is many islands, o'course, not just one." He swallowed; he'd never known what the name meant. "That's why Gryffindor an' his bride took `er sister up there. Plainty o'company. Other seals."

"Right", he said, in a daze. He felt so shocked by all of this he wasn't responding very well, he knew. "And you — you're —" He couldn't get out the words *You're a selkie*. His head was swimming; he was so confused. "But — you don't *always* wear those gloves..."

She shook her head. "Me mither trimmed the waibbing when I was wee. I still do it, but there's always a time when it grows back and I have ta wait. Then I wear the gloves. If ever'one knew... they'd think I was a freak. So I hide it."

Harry grimaced, thinking of his scar. *There was no hiding that, not really*. "I understand", he said simply. "And you — you can — can attract men when you want to. Like veelas can."

She nodded. "Me brither can, too. Attract women, that is. Oh, he was an awful playboy at school. It becomes easier fer a sailkie, male or female, after about the age o' fifteen or sixteen. It's stronger."

He frowned in thought. "How'd he get the amulet?"

Her eyes widened. "Aye, the amulet. See, after You-Know-Who's power broke — after *you* defeated'im — there was a gaineral sweep in the wizardin' wairld. Anyone who'd bin in Slytherin in school was suspected o'havin' bin a Daith Eater. Me mum lost'er job, and we faill on hard times. Me dad wasn' makin' vairy much, and we had some daibts to Gringotts..." Harry's mind worked quickly, figuring it out. *In my other life, Voldemort never fell, so his mother never lost her job, and Mariah's brother never felt*

particularly compelled to go into the lake, seeking the amulet, so it was still there when I rescued Ginny from the lake...

She sighed. "The laigend o'the amulet has been handed doon in our family. Mithers `ave bin taillin' their wee ones the story feraiver, it seems..." Harry could picture them, looking like Mariah with their wild dark hair and large, soulful eyes, whispering the tale to small, pale, upturned faces gathered round the hearth, while the winter winds scoured the exterior of a stone cottage on a bleak and rocky shore... "After a time, I think parts o' the story were considered maybe t' be invainted by some o' those who told it. Embroiderin' on it, ye see, like all oral traditions. To liven it oop. Each gaineration puttin' their mark on it, like. But Munro believed the pairt aboot the amulet, an' `e took it into `is haid to go into the loch to try `n' gait it, as `e raickoned it'd be daid valuable — if it were real. He used `is sailkie charms on the merking's daughter — it don't jest wairk on human women — found out it really existed, an' after `e told `er about the story of Slytherin cairsin' our ansaister, she convinced `er dad to give Munro the stone with the amulet. Munro brought it home and we all opened the stone t'gaiter.

"I was only four; Munro's a dozen years older than me. I'll naiver fergait whain me mum opened it — it was like a dream, like actually gaittin' t' `see Cinderaila's glass slipper, or the gold Rumpelstiltskin spun from straw. We all admired it aiver so long; it was beautiful and pairfect, pertaicted fer a thoosand yairs inside the stone. After, me mum put it away in the kist she hid under the hearth, where we kaipt our few traisures, and I thought it was safe and hidden... But a little while later, Munro gave me parents a pile of Galleons and wouldn't say where he'd got it. They were so wairried he'd done somethin' that'd land `im in prison, but he swore `e didn'. An' it hailped us go on, t'survive until me mither found wairk again..."

She sighed and looked down at her webbing. "He musta sold it. Maybe me mum `n' dad even knew `e did it, and didn't lait on t'me. But he shouldnae done it. *I'm* the one carryin' the cairse, I'm the one whose bairn'll be like me. I know he's the one wairked out how t'gait it from the loch, but it's *my* bairthright. And *she has it*. Ginny, that is. She's no idear what it means t'me..."

He nodded. "Ginny bought it in Knockturn Alley", he said softly

She lifted her face to him, her brow furrowed. "But how did she afford it? The gold Munro got fer it — I'd naiver seen that much in one place b'fore or since —"

He thought about the question of how Ginny had afforded it, and this caused him to think about some of the other things he'd seen in Borgin and Burkes, when he'd accidentally landed there the first time he'd used Floo powder (he suddenly realized that that was not long before Lucius Malfoy gave Tom Riddle's diary to Ginny, in Flourish and Blotts — he must have been carrying it while he was in Borgin and Burkes...). As he eavesdropped from a cupboard in the dusty dark magic shop, he'd been able to find out about some of the objects in the inventory there... the Hand of Glory... a cursed opal necklace... and now he tried to work out what might have happened. "Perhaps someone else bought the amulet before Ginny", he said slowly, still formulating his theory. "A lot of someone elses. Perhaps it caused those people as much trouble as it caused Slytherin, so they returned it, and the shopkeeper had to keep reducing the price..."

She laughed, somewhat bitterly. "Aye, he could prob'ly make a lot more on a *cairsed* amulet than one that wasn't..." She could see Harry was baffled. "Lait's just say I've heard *things* about Borgin and Burkes. Ye buy something there and bring it back in — ye don't gait yer money back. Ye gait store craidit fer saiventy-five paircent of what ye paid. Now, Ginny may have bin able to afford it `cause it was reduced after bein' brought back time an' again, but that don't mean Borgin and Burkes didn't make quite a lot on it..."

There was something still bothering Harry, though. "What *I* still don't understand how Draco didn't drown when he was in the lake with you. I mean, *you* can breath underwater, right? And you said your brother struck up a relationship with a mermaid. But why didn't *Draco* drown?"

"As long as he was touchin'me, he was safe. When yer in the water with a magical water creature, all ye need to do is be touchin'em to be safe." Harry's brain lit up with another revelation from his other life. *That's it!* he thought. *That's why Ginny was still alive when I went into the lake to save her from the creature that was spawned from the basilisk's egg with her hair in it — it was a magical underwater creature, and being touched by it meant that she could breath underwater! Even though it was trying to kill her...* He smiled to himself at the irony.

Mariah spread her hands again, staring at them as though this was a luxury, something she did not normally do. Then she looked up at Harry, her gaze very frank. "Did ye naiver — do — something — with one o' yer gairlfrainds underwater? In the prefaicts' bathroom, pairhaps?"

Harry felt himself flush as he remembered being with Hermione there — but they hadn't technically been *doing* anything while underwater. Slowly, the realization hit him, and he dropped his jaw, his eyes widening. "You were — were sleeping with Draco Malfoy *underwater*?"

She laughed wickedly, looking very pleased with herself. "No. We wair wide awake", she said, her voice dripping with amusement. Her dark eyes glittered and a mischievous grin still curled around the edges of her mouth.

Harry swallowed, remembering how he'd felt when she was doing her best to attract him, the feeling of losing his mind and being a complete and utter slave to his hormones. He hesitated before asking, but finally said, "Did you use your — your selkie charms to get Draco Malfoy to do that?" He wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer.

She stopped smiling and looked very serious suddenly. "No", she said, her voice firm. "He coulda gone at any time. I swear it. I didn' want to gait him that way. This — with you — this was the fairst time I aiver — aiver tried that. I — I didn't realize how much it wood affaict ye, Harry. I'm sorry, really. Ye looked like ye were goin' mad. I didn't plan to torture ye nor anythin'..."

He wasn't sure what to believe, and shook his head in bewilderment. "They — then why did you do it to *me*? You love *him*, don't you?"

She looked him in the eye. "Aye." He believed her.

"Then why —"

"*She* has the amulet!" Mariah cried suddenly. "It was so *she'd* see oos *togaither*!"

Harry was baffled as to why she'd want this. "*What?*"

Mariah lifted her chin. "I'm not stupid. I know she loves ye, and the only reason she don't leave Draco is `cause she's afraid he'll hairt ye. I don't know who she thinks she's foolin'." Well, Harry thought, I was certainly fooled for a good long time. "Aye, he loves `er. More'n he loves me. I know that." Her voice was softer, sadder now. "But I think that cood change. He hates'er, too, fer not feelin' the same as him. He wants'er ta hairt as much as he does. So he goes off with me and tries ta gait caught..."

and then backs oot of it. The love and hate is wagin' a war in `im, and *he's* the one losin'. He really wants her ta show she *cares*, that she gives a damn what `e does. But he and I both know she naiver will, because she's in love with *you*."

Harry swallowed. "Have — have you and Draco talked about this?"

She shook her haid. "He won't. Refuses. So — I thought, maybe if *she* thought it was *you* she'd lose if she didn' speak up and taill Draco it's over, she'd finally *do* somethin'. Finally aind it with him and claim ye, ta keep *me* away..."

Harry gasped. "You *wanted* Ginny to see me in the amulet? With you? Naked?" His head spun. Here he thought he and Ron were the only ones trying to break up Draco and Ginny, when Mariah had a plan of her own to accomplish the same end.

She shrugged. "Draco being with me don't make'er jailous. Hacked off, aye, she's hacked off aboot it. Has `er pride, like anyone. But `er love fer you's stronger than that, and I kin taill she don't want ye hait. Her seein' *you* with me might light a fire under `er, make `er take a stand. And give me `n' Draco a chance t' be happy, too." Harry didn't know what to say. "I was doin' it for the both o'ye. Ye *cood* show a wee bit o'gratitude."

But Harry wished she'd come to him and explained that she had the same goal, so they could have cooperated on a plan — a *different* plan. He hated to think how Ginny would react if she'd been holding the amulet when he and Mariah had been all over each other. The glare she received confirmed that no gratitude would be forthcoming. "I just hope to hell that Ginny *didn't* see that little display, that she wasn't touching her amulet! How stupid! If anything, it would be more likely to make her *stay* with Draco Malfoy! How could you — you —" He sputtered to a stop, at a loss for words.

Stupid stupid stupid.

Mariah shrugged. "I think I'm right", she said calmly, with a trace of smugness. "We'll see."

And she casually stood and put her robes back on over her dress, walking out of the passage, leaving Harry to grab his robes and follow her, so he wouldn't be lost.

They barely spoke the entire time they continued patrolling. It was disconcerting to continue to be in her presence until two in the morning; despite his best intentions, it was very difficult *not* to keep picturing her

down in the tunnel again, her skin glistening in the torchlight, her warm breath in his mouth, and on top of that, he still had the images from the Omnioculars in his head (although he hadn't looked at it since he'd used them).

At length, they went back to the entrance hall and met the patrollers for the third shift. From what he could tell, no one suspected what he and Mariah had been up to in the tunnels. *No wonder she and Draco Malfoy get away with this all the time*, he thought.

Filch and Flitwick were the staff patrollers for the third shift; Filch eyed Harry suspiciously (he'd reacted this way to Harry since his first year, and particularly his second, when he was convinced that Harry had petrified his cat), but Flitwick gave Harry his usual bubbly greeting, sounding just a little more tired than he usually did in class. Hermione was on this shift; she descended the broad steps with Karl Fauth, one of the new fifth-year Gryffindor prefects, who was yawning alertly, following her steps and treading on the hem of her robes more than once, making her scowl tiredly. A couple of Ravenclaws who had walked down with Flitwick rounded out the new group, and Harry nodded at Hermione as he trudged up the steps to Gryffindor Tower; then he turned back to look at her. She was scowling at *him* instead of Fauth now, and he longed to go back to ask her why, but she and the others were moving off to begin their patrolling. He couldn't remember when Hermione had looked *less* happy with him. If he didn't know better, he would think he was about to be on the receiving end of a very nasty Head Girl hex.

He entered the common room wearily, looking forward to getting some rest before the match the following day, hoping he wouldn't see Mariah when he closed his eyes... The match wasn't until the afternoon, so he could sleep late. In fact, he reckoned it would be better for him to play only an hour or two after rising rather than get up early and spend the morning doing *things* before playing; he wouldn't have as much time to tire himself out before the game.

But the sight that met his eyes in the common room made him stop in his tracks, frozen just inside the portrait hole. Ron was standing near the windows with his sister in his arms; she was clasping him about his waist and had her face buried on his chest; she was sobbing her heart out, and Harry swallowed, feeling his own heart break. *She had seen. She had touched the amulet at precisely the wrong time, and she had seen...*

Hermione knew, too, he realized. She must have found out before she left the common room to go patrolling. That was why she'd been looking at him *that way*...

His heart constricted within him, and he wanted to go to her, make it all right, but she was clinging desperately to Ron and his feet seemed to be rooted to the spot where he stood. Ron looked up and saw him; thankfully, he did not scowl and frown at Harry, but looked merely baffled. Over Ginny's head, his best friend and brother of the girl he loved mouthed the words, *What happened?*

Ginny hadn't told him then; perhaps she'd told Hermione, sobbed on her, then Hermione went to get Ron to take over when Hermione had to leave. Harry hit himself on his head; he wished he could do it harder. It didn't hurt enough. He mouthed the words *I'm stupid*, to Ron.

Ron exaggerated the movements of his mouth, silently responding, *I know. But what happened?*

Harry resisted the urge to stick his tongue out at him. Harry looked at Ginny, weeping as though it were the end of the world, and couldn't help the tears that started escaping his own eyes, running freely down his face. Ron noticed. As he patted his sister's back and rocked her back and forth, he again moved his mouth exaggeratedly, his silent question becoming, *Harry, what the hell happened?*

Harry wiped his eyes under his glasses, but his own tears wouldn't stop. *Oh, god.* He'd hurt her incredibly. This was the hurt he'd been trying to spare her when he didn't tell her about Malfoy and Felice, since he'd thought she was still in love with Draco Malfoy at the time. And now he'd hurt her anyway. He couldn't stop himself from sniffing, and then, completely against his will, a sob escaped him and she whirled around.

Her eyes.

Oh, Ginny's eyes when she was wild with grief and wanting to die... He had never wanted to make her look that way, never imagined he could. *That's not true*, he reminded himself. *She was also miserable when she realized that she might have gone to the Yule Ball with me, if she hadn't already accepted Neville's invitation.* But he had been too self-centered and depressed about Cho Chang at the time to pay much attention to her anguish, and although she had been upset then, running from the room in distress, this was a different degree of misery entirely...

He had no words, standing there facing her, tears streaming down both of their faces. He thought she would curse him, or swear at him, or fly at him and beat him with her fists, as she had at Ascog Castle. But instead, she took a few steps forward and ripped the amulet from her neck, breaking the chain, and flung it onto the floor before her face collapsed again and she fled up the steps to the girls' dorms.

When her footsteps had receded, Harry looked up at Ron, seeing that he'd been crying in sympathy with his sister, not even knowing the cause of her distress. He wiped his face impatiently and finally spoke aloud.

"Damn, Harry. Would you like to explain what that was all about?"

Harry swallowed, his face still wet, everything around him slightly out of focus, even with his glasses on. "Not especially", he croaked, although he wondered momentarily whether he could convince Ron to kill him, put him out of his misery... He looked at the amulet lying on the floor of the common room, and after what felt like an eternity, he finally stooped to pick it up. Holding it in his palm and then closing his hand around it for a few seconds, he received an immediate flash of Ginny, lying in her bed fully clothed, too grief-stricken to bother changing, hugging a pillow to her midsection and continuing to cry...

Putting the amulet in his pocket, he turned to climb the stairs to the dorm, not looking back. He remembered how Hermione had reacted to him and wondered whether he was going to lose his two best friends as well as Ginny; it was pretty clear that once Ron knew the full story, they would both take her side. *As they should*, he thought, condemning himself. The last time he'd felt so dreadful was when he'd found out in his other life that Jamie had died, and Ginny too. He felt like he was reliving getting that awful news. *Ginny will never have anything to do with me ever again*. She might as well have *been* dead, as far as he was concerned. Except that this time —

He was her murderer.

* * *

"Harry! What are you doing? Get up!"

"*Hunh* —?"

"The match!" Sirius shouted in his ear. "Why didn't anyone else around here wake you?"

"Why?" Harry said groggily, rubbing his eyes. "What time is it?" He looked toward the window; the sun was struggling to penetrate a thick,

typically Scottish autumnal cloud cover.

"Twelve-thirty. The match is in *half an hour*."

Harry felt wide awake now. "What? Shit, I'm sorry Sirius. I don't know why they didn't wake me..."

But he did. They'd probably all heard about him in the tunnels with Mariah. And everyone probably hated his guts now. First he'd made himself a laughingstock with the snake-into-girl spell, and now this. Just about everyone in Gryffindor who was going to the game was probably already planning to be cheering for England, for *Ron*, and now it was likely that even his stalwart die-hard supporters, like the Creevey brothers, would be cheering for England as well. (Although, to be fair, they *were* English.) Harry looked sheepishly at his godfather, who was randomly throwing clothes out of Harry's wardrobe, trying to find his Quidditch gear. *Maybe if I don't tell Sirius about last night until after the match, he'll at least be cheering me on.*

Sirius' search was finally successful, and he starting hurling Harry's Welsh uniform at him carelessly, not noticing where he was throwing things, so that Harry had to duck to avoid the rather hard and heavy shin-guards bashing him in the head.

"Sirius! Watch it! I know you used to be a Beater, but I'd rather wait until the match to start dodging Bludgers, if it's all the same to you."

Sirius laughed then and went to the door. "Get dressed like lightning, Harry. I had McGonagall get you a different Portkey on short notice, as the other one expired an hour ago. Most of the students who received permission to go have even left already. The last dozen were supposed to depart from the entrance hall with Professor McGonagall fifteen minutes ago. You and I are the last ones left in the castle who are going to be at the match today. Assuming you haven't changed your mind."

Harry was struggling into his jumper and buttoning his trousers at the same time, and his glasses went flying because of this. He sighed, exasperated, abruptly doing a summoning charm to get them back, as they had skidded under Ron's bed. Sirius raised his eyebrows and then nodded as Harry replaced them on his face.

"Wandless. Impressive."

"Yeah, well it's one of my specialities. Remember the first task of the Tournament? Anyway, it would be a lot more useful if I could dress by doing a summoning charm."

Sirius shook his head, looking like he was trying not to laugh. "Don't try it. Your dad was good with summoning charms too, and tried that on his wedding day, because he was running ridiculously behind schedule. He wound up with that belt thing — what do you call it —"

Harry frowned. "Um — you mean the cumberbund?"

"That's it! He wound up with it wrapped around his head like a turban. I told him he looked dashing that way, and ought to go through the ceremony wearing it on his head, but he threatened to demote me to mere groomsman and make Remus the best man if I came up with any more 'suggestions' like that..."

Harry guffawed as he tied his shoes, grateful to Sirius for making him laugh, for relaxing him, just as he had probably relaxed his jittery father on his wedding day (threats to be demoted notwithstanding). *Just think about the match. Just think about the match*, he told himself sternly. *My bloody private life will have to be sorted out later. Right now — I've got a job.*

Harry was ready with ten minutes to spare. He and Sirius went down to the common room and then out of the portrait hole to the corridor. Sirius already had his broom for him, and when the Portkey took effect five minutes later, Harry felt like he was being whacked on the head with the handle as they hurtled through space, the hook behind his navel pulling him toward a castle in Wales, toward his first professional Quidditch match.

They landed in the Welsh changing rooms, which were deserted except for Owen, who looked wide-eyed and frantic at seeing Harry.

"Harry! There the hell you are. Erica is all set to play, in case you didn't show! What were you thinking?"

Harry sheepishly ran his hand through his hair. "Overslept", he said feebly. Owen looked at Sirius in disbelief.

"*Overslept?*" he said his voice squeaking at the end. Harry grimaced.

"Sorry. Sirius got me here in time, though, right?" he said hopefully. To his relief, Owen nodded at him.

"Only just", he said grumpily. But he didn't have time to ream out Harry for tardiness. He immediately became all-business. "So Harry — how's your broom? Did you clean it yesterday? Trim the twigs?"

Harry hadn't, he confessed, but after giving it a cursory examination, Owen declared, "It'll do", in a slightly dejected voice, and then the three of

them walked down the corridor leading to the grassy pitch. When he reached the arched stone doorway, he was completely unprepared for the sounds and sights which met him. Inside the changing rooms, the thick stone walls very effectively shut out the world. Now his ears were assaulted by the dull roar of a crowd that had to be fifty-thousand strong. Above this he heard a voice reading adverts for various wizarding products in a dull monotone, filling in the time before the match. All of the openings in the walls below the parapets had had their protective canvas coverings raised, like window shades, and he could see row upon row of spectators there ready to watch England play Wales, white banners with red crosses on one side, white and green banners with red dragons on the other. There were also people sitting in the stands that had been erected behind the parapets, high up on the castle walls themselves, where Harry thought the best views were, even though those seats weren't sheltered from bad weather (should there be any). As he expected, there were numerous Aurors positioned amongst the spectators, as there had been at the game Harry had attended during the summer. They looked grim and business-like, and Harry tried not to think about the reason for their presence.

He looked at the other Welsh players, waiting on the painfully-green pitch, wearing the same red jumper and trousers as him, the same half-white and half-green robes with the red dragon seeming to climb up the back. Then he glanced across the pitch at the English players, each one wearing a steel-grey jumper and trousers, topped by blindingly bright white robes with the red cross of St. George on the back, as though they were all wearing armor and metal mail under voluminous capes, preparing to go off on one of the Crusades, or to fight at Agincourt. But for their weapons, they bore not longbows or heavy broadswords, but new state-of-the-art Jupiter 5000 brooms, all of them identically perfect down to the last straw, each gleaming like beacons in the grey autumn afternoon. Ron had told him about the new brooms — Ron could keep his, too, so he'd have a beautiful new broom for playing on the house team, as well — but this was the first time Harry had seen them. He tried not to feel a pang of envy for those beautiful new brooms.

Ron was the tallest one on the team, and Harry couldn't help notice that he looked more like a knight preparing himself for battle than any of the other English players. He'd trimmed his red beard quite closely, although

Harry knew it would probably grow noticeably during the match (it was only two days before the full moon) and somehow, this only added to the illusion that he was a knight from a bygone era about to go into battle, or the joust of his life, perhaps.

Harry had never before gone into a Quidditch match feeling certain that he would lose, but he did so now. He felt utterly outclassed and intimidated by the English team, with their gleaming new brooms, and it was almost his undoing completely when he saw Remus Lupin slap Ron on the back and grin at him before stepping to the sidelines. Harry ached; Sirius was truly the only one on his side. Harry felt a pat on his shoulder and looked up to find his godfather grinning at him.

"Don't you worry, Harry", he said. He could have been reading Harry's mind. Or maybe just picking up on some of his insecurities. "Just do what you do best to the best of your ability; no one can ask more of you."

Harry nodded nervously, his stomach flopping about disconcertingly. Sirius left him and the sound of the crowd swelled as they collectively perceived that the game was going to start. Then the world was a blur as he flew through the air with his teammates, demonstrating their flying skills, moving in formation along one side of the pitch while the English team flew on the other. A familiar voice read out the names of the English team as the fourteen fliers *whooshed* through the chilly air, ending with, "...aaaaaand Weasley!" The English team banked and turned, showing off even more, to the very loud approval of the crowd. The announcement of the Welsh players followed, and Harry seemed to have gone temporarily deaf until he heard his own name in the lineup —"*Potter!*"— followed by another roar of approval going up from the Welsh side when the list was done. That roar was *something*, it was comforting, but as far as he knew there was no one on the Welsh side that gave two figs about him apart from Sirius, who was in the top box on that side, grinning and clapping continuously. As he flew, Harry glanced quickly down at the English side; Ron had gotten tickets in the top box there for Hermione and Ginny, and his older brothers were there too, along with his parents. Harry ached inside, thinking of Ginny crying on Ron last night... *Don't think of Ginny*, he told himself sternly. Even Maggie was there, although Harry didn't see Snape. The entire Weasley family had turned out for Ron, beaming with pride, and Harry ached again, ached that they weren't cheering for *him*.

Enough, he told himself, irritated that he was envying Ron his family yet again. *I thought I'd gotten over that*. He tried to focus on the game, on the business at hand, and joined the other players around the center of the field, where the Quaffle was going to be released, beginning the action. He glanced up at the Weasleys once, furtively, then forced his eyes away again.

Don't think of Ginny.

Before Harry knew what was happening, one of the English Chasers had the Quaffle and was already racing down the field toward the Welsh goals. The air was thick with players on their brooms in hot pursuit, while the Beaters were already hitting the Bludgers back and forth across the field with ear-piercing *pings!* when the metal bands on the bats met the heavy iron balls. Harry shadowed his team's own Chasers, ducking and dodging Bludgers on the way, but to his disappointment, the Quaffle flew into one of the hoops as though magnetically drawn to something on the other side, and the familiar voice he'd noticed earlier cried out, "Montague scores! TEN TO NOTHING, ENGLAND!"

Harry glanced up briefly, finally realizing that it was Ludo Bagman's voice, just like at the Quidditch World Cup. He tore his eyes away just in time to see a Bludger bearing down on him, and he ducked. He swooped down near the ground, a mere six feet up, feeling a breeze as the players overhead moved back and forth. He wasn't watching the first time Ron scored; he was racing toward the English goal posts, thinking he would steer his broom up once he was there and fly above the action to look for the Snitch. He was caught by surprise, in mid-dive, and it was a miracle he didn't crash, when he heard Bagman's magically amplified voice cry, "Weasley scores! TWENTY TO NOTHING, ENGLAND!"

He jerked his broom up and swished past the English Keeper, a formidable-looking witch who could have been Crabbe or Goyle's older sister, with her dark hair pulled back into a severe bun and a scowl on her corpulent face. Harry glanced around when he was a good ten feet above her, looking for that glint of gold, the other players a blur of movement at the other end of the pitch. Then he was distracted as the roar of the crowd swelled yet again and, starting to sound like he was stuck in a rut, Bagman shouted once more, "*Weasley scores!*"

Harry felt like he was struggling to breathe; his lungs felt tight for no reason other than he was scared. He was scared that he was going to lose in

front of all of these people. And his best friend would be largely responsible. Perhaps it was because he was hovering near the English Keeper — that might be what did it, what made him think of it... In his mind, he suddenly found himself thrown back to his other life, when he was the Slytherin Keeper and his nemesis was Ron, captain and star of the Gryffindor team. Well, he reckoned, the lion was a symbol of England, and a dragon was near enough to a snake, the symbol of Slytherin...

The game was played almost wholly at the Welsh end, goal after goal being racked up by England. Harry wasn't certain that he'd been keeping an accurate count, but he thought that Ron was responsible for about half of the English points.

He circled the air above the English Keeper, hoping and praying that the Welsh Chasers would manage to get to this end of the pitch soon. He remembered a game from his fifth year when he'd beaten Ron in his other life; during that game he'd gotten so tired of Ron continually snagging the Quaffle that he didn't throw it to a Slytherin Chaser after intercepting an attempted Gryffindor goal, but impatiently flew the length of the pitch himself, Slytherin Keeper scoring on the Gryffindor Keeper, before zipping back to his post. The other Keeper had been so shocked he'd let the Quaffle fly past him without moving at all. Luckily, there was absolutely nothing in the rules against a player who wasn't a Chaser doing this.

Harry smiled now, knowing what he would do. *Well, to get this job I took up a Beater's bat; perhaps to win the game — especially against Ron — I need to give my team yet another Chaser. At least, until I spot the Snitch...*

Harry plunged forward, toward the mass of players at the other end of the pitch. England had just scored again — a player other than Ron this time — and the score was one-hundred to nothing. This couldn't go on much longer if they were to have any chance at all. Once England had five more Quaffles through the hoops there'd be almost no chance of beating them. Even if he caught the Snitch at that point, it would be a tie.

The Welsh Keeper had blocked another attempted goal and nervously looked for a Welsh Chaser to throw it to, but the English Chasers and Beaters were blocking them, while the English Seeker, a small wiry man who seemed to be in his mid-twenties, circled above the fray near the English Keeper, an amused smirk on his face.

Harry dived at the Beater who was blocking one of his Chasers; he was the only man on this bloke, whereas there were two English players blocking each of the other Chasers. Harry had a hard time remembering this Chaser's name at first, and then he remembered that it was a combination of his mother's name and the name of Roger Davies' late brother: Evan Evans.

The Beater saw Harry coming, recklessly aiming right for him, and a panic shone in his eyes for a half-minute before he ducked out of the way, avoiding a collision. Harry hadn't really had any intention of colliding with him, knowing that he could swerve at the last minute, but he'd frightened the English Beater sufficiently so that he moved first. Luckily, Harry didn't have a Blatching foul called on him for flying with the intent to collide. (He would have a hard time making anyone think that he just wanted the other player to *think* he was going to hit him.) The referee was busy elsewhere and didn't see what he'd done.

"Thanks, Harry!" Evans shouted to him, and when their Keeper saw that Evans was open, he aimed the Quaffle in his direction. Unfortunately, Ron broke away from the other Welsh Chaser he'd been helping block and intercepted the ball, then moved forward, poised to score again. Harry frowned; Evans was supposed to get the Quaffle, not Ron, but Ron's reflexes were just far and away faster than anyone else's on the field. Harry motioned to the Chaser and he followed Harry into the scoring area, where as many Welsh players as wanted could go, but only one English player, or risk a foul being called for Stooging. With three Welsh players thus effectively defending three hoops, Ron didn't manage to score. In fact, Harry saw him look right at him before aiming the ball directly at the hoop closest to his best friend. Eyes narrowed, Harry caught the Quaffle and then immediately dove below the crowd of players, streaking toward the English goal and the Goyle-and-Crabbish witch waiting there. Evans and one of the other Chasers followed him swiftly, and, not trusting to his ability to actually put the thing through a hoop, as he'd never really practiced this (he'd been very lucky to score, in his other life), he threw it to Evans when they were close enough, making sure he stayed out of the scoring area. Evans feinted to the left and then scored through the center hoop, sending the Welsh side of the castle-stadium into hysterics. "ONE HUNDRED TO TEN!" Bagman cried above the roar of the crowd. Harry was glad he hadn't tried to score; catching things he could do, and

throwing the Quaffle a good distance after stopping it from going into a hoop, but throwing with accuracy at a goal that was being protected was another story altogether. He knew his limitations.

The problem with the Chasers on his team, he realized, was that they had *not* been adequately prepared for playing against Ron Weasley by scrimmaging with the Harpies. The Harpies were good — the best in the League — but compared to the sort of players to which they were accustomed, Ron was another story entirely. Of all the players on the Welsh team, only Harry knew what Ron was thinking, what he was likely to do next, what he was capable of.

This first success seemed to galvanize the Welsh Chasers, and after the English Keeper attempted to hurl the Quaffle to one of her Chasers, one of the Welsh Chasers, Wescoat, intercepted it, and she immediately scored for Wales again.

"ONE-HUNDRED TO TWENTY!"

Now there was some back and forth between the two ends of the field; Harry thought his teammates might have started getting dejected about the lopsided score. They seemed to have woken up now, and as his team scored their fourth goal, still holding the English team to one-hundred, Harry was somewhat shocked to feel a jolt as a Bludger collided with his broom twigs, making him fly crazily for a moment until he grasped the handle with determination and zoomed straight up, to shake the wobbles out of it.

He looked for the Beater who'd hit it, but oddly, both English Beaters were at the other end of the field, hitting the other Bludger back and forth to each other while attempting to keep possession of it, so that they could try to hit any Chaser who attempted to score on their Keeper again. Then Harry looked up and the same Bludger was heading for him again. He waited until the last minute, then dodged to the side, feeling the thing whistle past his ear, it was uncomfortably close.

He continued to watch the six Chasers and the Quaffle with one eye, and the Bludger with the other. He called to his Beaters, "Can you do something about this thing? It seems to be following me."

They nodded, flying toward it with their bats poised, and Harry saw that Ron had intercepted a pass between Evans and Wescoat again. Harry zoomed toward Ron, and then was flying right by his side as they both

bore down on the Welsh goal. Ron turned his head to glance at Harry briefly.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Harry?"

Harry kept an eye on the Quaffle under Ron's arm. "Last time I checked I was playing Quidditch. It's a game. On broomsticks. See, there are seven people to a team —"

"Bugger off, Harry!" he swore at him, clearly irritated and distracted, which had been Harry's goal.

"You won't get rid of me that easy, Weasley", Harry said, deciding not to be familiar.

"Oh, is *that* how it is, *Potter*? Well, take *this* —" And he elbowed Harry violently in the ribs, making him catch his breath. Harry wondered how much that was for being irritating while he was trying to score, and how much of it was for Ginny crying last night...

Don't think of Ginny, don't think of Ginny...

"AND WEASLEY FOULS POTTER! COBBING!"

Harry grinned at Ron, flying off before Ron took another shot at him with his elbow.

"EVANS WILL TAKE THE FOUL SHOT FOR WALES!" Bagman declared, after seeing the hand signals from the referee. Ron had to give the Quaffle up to Evans. Harry had been trying to set him off, and it had worked. His ribs weren't too happy, but he'd played with worse pain before. He knew Ron well, and Ron had behaved very predictably. Harry knew he wouldn't normally let himself be wound up by something so minor, but Harry also knew Ron's temper was a bit shorter than usual in the days preceding the full moon. It was inside information, but it had worked to his advantage. And then there was Ginny, too...

Don't think of Ginny, don't think of Ginny...

It was a rough game, and soon fouls were being called on both teams. Blagging (seizing the opponent's broomtail), Blatching, an epidemic of Cobbing, (suddenly, elbows were everywhere) and two incidents of Stooging by the English players (once by Ron, who hadn't been able to stop his broom before he'd strayed into the scoring area, where one of his fellow Chasers was trying to score).

The score had reached a phenomenal level, which Harry had never experienced in school play: eight hundred thirty to seven-hundred. The English Seeker was marking Harry, whether he was adding his presence to

guarding the Welsh goals or helping pass the Quaffle between the Chasers, to prevent the English Chasers (which was to say *Ron*) from intercepting it. (Ron seemed to be responsible for most of the interceptions during the game.) Harry was enjoying throwing the Quaffle back and forth so much that he almost didn't notice the glimmer of gold out of the corner of his eye. He pretended at first that he *hadn't* seen it, and turned his head to find out what the English Seeker was up to. Was he aware that the Snitch had appeared?

But the English Seeker was facing the wrong way, and evidently hadn't seen what Harry had. Now the Snitch was hurtling along in between the two English Beaters, who were also oblivious to this fact, and Harry did a one-eighty, swerving so that he'd be flying between them, growing closer and closer to the Snitch. Suddenly, the same Bludger that had been plaguing him all game came bearing down on him again. He dove, then swerved up again, reaching up to grab the Snitch in his right hand, feeling the strong wings beating against his palm and an exultation ripping through him. He swerved away from the Beaters, one of whom had hit the Bludger toward him before he realized what Harry had done, and, Snitch in hand, Harry ducked the metal sphere once again before hovering near the middle of the field, holding up the Snitch with a triumphant grin. The crowd realized what had happened more quickly than Ludo Bagman, and the roar became positively deafening.

"*AND IT'S WALES!*" Bagman finally declared, after everyone present already knew. "*POTTER HAS THE SNITCH! WALES WILL PLAY FRANCE IN THE QUARTER-FINALS!*"

Harry grinned, seeing even the Hogwarts students who'd been sitting on the English side erupt in cheers and applause, jumping to their feet, which was probably confounding the other spectators sitting around them. He waved to the Creevey brothers, yelling themselves hoarse, leaning precariously over the stone barrier at the front of the "window" in the stone wall from where they'd been viewing the match. Harry could see Dean and Seamus behind the smaller boys, hopping up and down and waving to Harry as he flew his victory lap with the Snitch over his head.

But this was cut short as the problematic Bludger came round again and hit his broom twigs. He lost his grip on the handle and fell forward, striking his chin painfully on the wood and biting his lip so that it bled. He had his arms wrapped around his broom awkwardly, the Snitch still in his

right hand, when it came back at him again. He tried to duck, and instead rolled right off his broom, hanging by his left hand while he continued to grasp the Snitch in his right. He heard the crowd gasp and he looked down, thinking grimly that soon they'd have something to *really* gasp about. He was up above the parapets, high enough that he could do far worse damage to himself than breaking his legs should he fall. Well, he thought, if I have to I'll transform in midair and fly; better that people find out I'm an Animagus than die to keep it a secret...

Even as he felt his sweaty fingers slipping from the wood, he also felt a *swishing* in the air around him, and the next thing he knew, he was falling — only to be stopped short by a large strong arm being wrapped around his chest, making it hard for him to breathe.

It was Ron. He steered his broom up and over the parapets, landing on the Welsh side, depositing Harry on the deck next to the top box before landing and dismounting from his broom. Harry's breathing was labored, and the roar of the crowd was deafening.

"AND CHASER WEASLEY PREVENTS POTTER FROM TAKING A BAD FALL!" Bagman bellowed hoarsely.

Harry looked up at Ron and nodded. After he'd gotten his breath back, he managed to choke out, "Thanks, mate."

Ron nodded back at him. "Well, just because we lost doesn't mean I want my best friend spattered all over the pitch, now does it?" And then he broke into a very typical Ron grin and thrust his hand at Harry. Harry grasped it, pulling himself up, and once he was on his feet he hugged Ron roughly, thumping him soundly on the back before releasing him.

"You great prat", he said affectionately. Ron shrugged.

"One of us had to be on the losing team." Harry saw past the casual dismissal of the loss, saw the disappointment in his eyes, and wished that there had been some way for them both to win. Stupid, really, but he still wished it. He turned when he heard footsteps; Sirius was hurrying down from the top box to see him, grinning broadly the entire time. But suddenly, with a *crash!* the Bludger that had hit Harry's broom collided with one of the parapets near where he and Ron were standing, taking off a piece of stone roughly the size of Harry's head. He and Sirius and Ron shielded their faces from the flying fragments as the sphere arched up into the air again. *That could have been my skull*, Harry thought, swallowing.

This wasn't funny or merely inconvenient anymore.

Then another familiar black-haired figure was standing near him, saying with a calm gravity, "Let it aim for you again, Harry, and then duck as fast as you can."

To his surprise, it was Snape, who, it appeared, had also been sitting on the Welsh side.

"You might need help", Sirius said to him, even though he wasn't looking at Snape; like Severus Snape, he was watching the Bludger come round for another attempt at decapitating Harry. Snape nodded at him.

"Together on three. One, two — THREE!"

The two of them pointed their wands at the approaching cannon-ball like projectile, and it slowed to a stop, hovering in the air two feet in front of Harry, who hadn't bothered to duck. He felt like he was holding his breath. And then suddenly, the wind was knocked out of him as a small body flung itself against his midsection.

"Harry Potter! Harry Potter! You is all right!"

"D — Dobby?" Harry sputtered. More and more people were gathering in the spot where he and Ron had landed. He looked up in shock to see Aberforth Dumbledore grinning at him, looking odd to Harry in old grey wizarding robes that he'd thrown over his Muggle clothes rather hurriedly, it seemed. Harry remembered that he'd usually looked rather smart when he was teaching Charms in fifth year, while Flitwick was in the hospital wing. Perhaps he'd been borrowing robes from his brother. (Professor Dumbledore had some rather impressive ensembles, usually with matching hats.) And with him was Sam Bell, which really bowled Harry over, as Sam couldn't do much magic anymore, and the break-up with Katie hadn't exactly gone well. But that didn't seem to matter now. Sam and Aberforth came forward and shook his hand, patting him on the back, and Harry's heart felt very full. Now he also noticed Hagrid and Mad-Eye Moody and his sister (whom Harry *still* had to remember to call Professor Figg). Evidently, Sirius *hadn't* been the only supporter he'd had on the Welsh side. He even thought he saw large brown eyes and pointy ears peeking out nervously around the edge of Aberforth's robes.

"Winky?" he whispered, incredulous. She crept out, her large eyes shining. She wore what appeared to be a little girl's set of robes, and in stark contrast to when she'd been at Hogwarts, in spite of the fact that she was technically wearing *clothes*, and not a tea-towel or old pillowcase, the

robes looked immaculately clean and she seemed to be relatively healthy and whole.

"Hello, Harry", she squeaked. "Master was wanting me to come with him because he thought I would enjoy it." *Master?* And then Harry remembered that Winky had gone to work for "the headmaster's brother." Somehow, he'd managed to forget that this was the same as Aberforth, whom Harry had learnt to call Dick Abernathy in the Muggle world. Harry almost laughed at the thought; somehow, he hadn't pictured "Dick" going home to a hot meal and a flat cleaned by a house elf, but that was evidently the way he lived now. It was even possible that she was accepting some small payment, since she was wearing clothes. One thing did puzzle him, though.

"I thought you were afraid of heights, Winky", he said to her.

"Oh, I am", she confirmed, her voice going up still higher. "Until — until we came up the stairs, we was in the lowest seats..." She clung to Aberforth again, the fabric of his robes clutched frantically in her bony fingers. Aberforth patted her head fondly.

"There, there, Winky. I'd never let any harm come to you, you know that..." Harry's throat was tight; his voice was so like Dumbledore's. And yet —

"Where's Professor Dumbledore?" Harry asked, looking around. He noticed that Aberforth looked somewhat uncomfortable. So did Sirius and Snape, who glanced at each other furtively, he saw.

"He would have liked to come, Harry", Aberforth told him. "But — it wasn't possible. He does hope you and Ron will forgive him." His look seemed to say, *Do not ask any more questions right now.*

Harry nodded. "Of course, of course. Just wondering."

Now their number included Owen Aberystwyth, Monty Mathers and Ludo Bagman; Remus Lupin and Ron's parents and older brothers had come over from the English side, as well. (Harry saw that Hermione, Ginny and Maggie were still on the other side of the pitch.) They were all gawping at the floating Bludger.

"What the hell's going on?" Owen demanded, pointing with his thumb at the Bludger, still hovering in mid-air. Snape looked at him disdainfully.

"It would seem that this Bludger was tampered with. It was pursuing Harry rather single-mindedly, even after the match, when it should have

returned to the ground. If Mr. Weasley had not caught him, you would have been missing your starting Seeker in the match against France."

Mathers stepped up to Snape, looking truculent. "What are you implying? That we cheated?"

Snape's expression did not change. "Hardly. It is not necessary for the Bludger-tampering to have anything to do with the game. *Someone* might have been trying to hurt Harry for reasons quite apart from altering the outcome of a *Quidditch match*," he said, his opinion of Mathers quite clear from his tone. It was also clear what he meant by *someone*; everyone knew the *someone* who'd had it in for Harry since he was a one-year-old.

Bagman had de-amplified his voice and stepped forward now, a mock-jovial expression on his face. "Now, now, we don't want to worry any of our — *friends*," he said, motioning with his head at an Auror standing about twenty feet away. "Next thing you know, the Ministry will think we can't hold the European Cup here..."

"Is that all you're worried about?" Ron yelled at him, surprising Harry. If anyone thought Quidditch was one of the most important things in the *world*, it was Ron. "If I hadn't caught him, Harry would be a puddle on the ground!"

Harry choked for a second. "Erm, thanks Ron. A bit vivid, but thanks." Ron grimaced.

"Sorry, Harry. You know, for the first time, I'm glad I have werewolf reflexes and instincts for a reason other than playing Quidditch. Even before you started to fall, I had this nagging feeling that I should turn to look in your direction, and —"

"*What?*" Owen Aberystwyth roared now, interrupting Ron. Harry saw a swish of a robe out of the corner of his eye — he thought someone had ducked behind Aberforth, but he wasn't sure. Winky was still pressed to his side, but she was no longer looking afraid due to the height of the castle walls; her round eyes looked toward where Owen, Mathers and Bagman were standing. Bagman was frowning deeply.

"Oh dear, oh dear", he kept repeating, looking sadly at Ron and shaking his head.

Ron frowned back at him. "Oh dear *what?*"

"You're a werewolf?" Mathers said, looking very pale.

Ron shrugged. "Yeah. Are you saying you didn't know? I thought you got my medical records from Madam Pomfrey. You did *read* them, didn't

you?"

Mathers looked flabbergasted. "I — it's just — usually a formality. I filed them away. I did ask her whether you were in good health, if there was anything we needed to be concerned about. She said you were as healthy as a horse."

Owen broke in, looking as though he didn't believe for a minute that Mathers was just finding out about Ron's lycanthropy. "What you *should* have asked her was whether he has any medical conditions which would prevent him from playing professional Quidditch!"

Ron's jaw dropped. "Prevent me —"

Bagman was *tsking* with his tongue against his teeth. "Ah, yes. I'm afraid that there *is* a rule that was instituted years ago, mostly because of wizard vampires wanting to play. The rule prevents wizard part-humans from participating in the league. A werewolf is also a part-human. I'm sorry to say that you're off the team, Weasley", Bagman said. Harry looked at Bagman with narrowed eyes. *He didn't sound very sorry.*

"W — well th — then", Mathers sputtered, "we should play the game over, with one of our reserves..."

"What's the point?" Bagman said hurriedly. *Too* hurriedly, Harry thought. "Wales will play France. England didn't win. If England had won — yes, the match would have to be done over. But it's rather moot, since you lost, don't you think?" Mathers was glaring at Bagman; Harry thought Bagman had been rather tactless about the *since you lost* part.

Ron looked around at them all, speechless. "I — I just thought everybody knew. I thought it was in the papers when there was the news about Sirius being cleared and Pettigrew framing him — all that. You know — what happened in the forest last term."

Harry furrowed his brow, thinking. "Actually, Ron, now that I think about it — I don't recall seeing anything in any of the *Prophet* stories about you being bitten. After all, you never brought charges against Remus. If you had, there might have been some coverage, but since you didn't —"

Ron shrugged. "It wasn't his fault his hiding place was set on fire." He shook his head. "What a way for this to come out..." He sounded utterly dejected. Bagman was eyeing Mathers suspiciously.

"Are you saying that you *didn't* know Weasley was a werewolf, *and* you had nothing to do with this Bludger?"

Mathers put his face in Bagman's now. "Oh, so now you *are* accusing me of cheating? Is that it? Is it?"

Harry stepped in between them. "The game's over. Let it drop", he said to both of them. Bagman gave Harry a penetrating look for a moment, and Harry wondered about something he remembered from his fourth year... Harry looked at Winky now, still clinging to Aberforth Dumbledore and looking at Ludo Bagman with wide, frightened eyes...

"And what about the house team?" Ron was saying now, evidently not having noticed what Harry had seen. "Does that mean I can't be Quidditch captain any more?" He looked even more distressed about this than not being on the English team any more.

Snape came to the rescue again. "I believe", their Potions Master said now, "that there is no rule against part-humans participating in the Inter-House Quidditch Cup. You should have no problems continuing to lead your house team", he said dryly, as though he wished this weren't the case (Slytherin wouldn't stand a chance against Ron, he probably knew). Harry could see that the full impact of the ruling against Ron was hitting home. *He can't become a professional player after he finishes school. He can't Apparate, either, which will affect his other job possibilities as well.* Harry swallowed, watching Remus Lupin's face, as he put his hand on Ron's shoulder; Ron looked down at him in fear, as though seeing his future and being repulsed by it. Remus let his hand drop and backed away. He seemed to be feeling a fresh wave of guilt for altering the course of Ron's life in such an irrevocable way.

The crowd on the parapets was remarkably quiet and subdued now. Suddenly, evidently not being able to take it any more, Charlie Weasley strode up to his brother and threw his arm around his shoulder. "S'all right, Ron, yeah? I have a surprise for you. You said that broom's yours, right?" he said, nodding at Ron's beautiful Jupiter. Ron clutched it tightly, looking at Monty Mathers uncertainly.

"Well, I *thought* it was..."

"Yeah, only someone who was too *daft* to actually *read* your medical records would probably be perfectly *happy* to give it to you as a *parting* gift, don't you think?" Charlie said with an edge to his voice; he was ostensibly speaking to Ron, but glaring at Mathers the whole time. Harry remembered how Mathers had longed to have Charlie on his team when

he'd finished school, before the lure of dragons had drawn Charlie off to Romania.

"Yeah", Mathers said dejectedly. "Keep the ruddy broom."

"Perfect!" Charlie crowed, tightening his hold around Ron's shoulders. "Just the thing to ride in the annual broom race from Kopparberg to Arjeplog, right along with me! Didn't I tell you I was going to be in the race this year? Some mates of mine from the reservation in Romania have been going up to Sweden to fly in the race every year, and they've been pestering me forever to join in. We can give them two Weasleys for the price of one! Say you'll do it, yeah?"

Ron looked down at Charlie, half a head shorter than him, his round tanned face grinning broadly. Ron gave in and a slow smile crept across his face. "Yeah, I'll do it. Only — are part-humans allowed?" He glanced at Bagman, the smile evaporating.

Ludo Bagman looked at the Weasleys around him with a clear distaste. In addition to Charlie, who was still by Ron's side, the twins were glaring at Bagman with their arms crossed on their chests and Bill was also giving him a gimlet eye. Harry noticed for the first time that Percy was absent.

He shrugged and said in a rather high-pitched voice, "Fine. I can say, as the person who takes registration from British participants in the race, that there are no rules against part-humans."

Sirius stepped forward and put his hand on Harry's shoulder now. "And Harry will probably have his Apparition test by then, so he can come and watch you both. Hermione too."

Harry hadn't thought about this. He grinned up at Ron. "That'll be brilliant! I can see my best friend win the annual broom race!"

Ron was grinning again, looking like he couldn't possibly find any reason to be angry with Harry now. "Right after I get to see you win the European Cup, you mean?"

They both laughed; Harry was glad that they'd managed to smooth over the awkwardness of Ron not being allowed to play professional Quidditch any more — for the moment. There was still a slight shadow behind Ron's eyes, despite his putting a good face on things, thanks to Charlie. Ron couldn't exactly make a living, when he was out of school, from flying in an annual broom race, but it was at least something he was uniquely suited for. He was probably better suited than any of the other racers, in fact, who could be in very grave danger from some of the dragons on the reservation

through which the race course ran. Ron could withstand a lot more in terms of physical rigor and burns, plus his reflexes would put him in a good position to avoid most of the injuries he would probably otherwise receive.

But as the crowd dispersed and Harry prepared to return to Hogwarts with Sirius, he couldn't help notice that Winky continued to peer around Aberforth's legs at Bagman, watching him very, very fearfully, and trembling the whole time.

* * *

There was an insanely gleeful party in the Gryffindor common room when Harry returned; it was as if everyone there had been on the Welsh side during the match, instead of most of them being on the English side. Harry decided that he didn't mind. As time went on, though, and Harry noticed Ron becoming more and more withdrawn, he wished the Creeveys and Seamus and Dean would stop describing every play of the game to the younger students and just go to bed, even though it was barely seven o'clock in the evening. (Orion Pierson kept begging to hear more, shooting Harry grins every so often and sometimes mentioning that he and Harry both lived in Ascog Castle. Students below third year hadn't been given the opportunity to ask their parents and guardians permission to go to the match.)

Someone was playing a Wizarding Wireless and couples were dancing lazily to a slow song, but when Hermione tried to coax Ron into a dance, he pulled away from her brusquely and went up the stairs to the boys' dorms, leaving Hermione looking rather forlorn, staring after him. Harry started to approach her, but she suddenly glared at him and walked over to Neville, pulling him to his feet and leading him to the clutch of other dancing couples rather forcefully, leaning her head on Neville's chest as he led her around the middle of the floor with the other dancers. It seemed that she was very pointedly *not* looking at Harry.

He grimaced and turned away from them, only to see a school owl pounding itself silly on one of the windows. He opened it and the owl promptly entered and dropped a piece of parchment in Harry's hands before leaving again. Harry closed the window and unrolled the parchment; it was very brief:

We need to talk. Trophy Room, seven-thirty.
Ginny

He swallowed. *Don't think of Ginny, don't think of Ginny*, had been his mantra throughout the game. Now he *needed* to think of Ginny, think of the way she'd been sobbing on Ron last night. *Ron must still not know what had happened, or else he'd be as cold toward me as Hermione is*, he thought, looking up at her with Neville again. (Neville, he thought, looked far too happy for his own good.)

Harry checked his watch; he had plenty of time to walk to the Trophy Room slowly if he left now. He made his way toward the portrait hole, no one noticing his exodus, and was soon walking through the cold corridors of the castle, his heart pounding quickly as he tried to figure out what he was going to say, how he was going to explain to her about Mariah. In his pocket he still carried the amulet she'd abandoned, resisting the temptation to reach in and hold it, to determine what she was doing right now. *It will be all right, it will be all right*, he told himself over and over. But he didn't believe it.

He reached the Trophy room ten minutes early, and found that someone else was already there: Mariah Kirkner and Draco Malfoy. To his relief, they weren't touching, just standing, leaning against one of the trophy cases, talking quietly. Harry glared at them both when he entered.

"Clear off. I need to speak to someone here, and you're the last two people in the world I want around for this..."

Mariah frowned. "Clear off? But it's Ginny, isn't it? She asked us to be here too. Hair note just said, 'We need ta talk'."

Harry licked his lips and swallowed, not liking this. "She asked all three of us here? To talk?"

"Yes." Ginny's voice was icy as she entered the room, looking both regal and fragile. Harry could see the purple shadows under her eyes, from crying the night before. It had been impossible to see her face clearly when she was sitting in the stands at the game and he was flying overhead. The three of them stood rather awkwardly while she stopped about six feet from them and put her hands on her hips. She glared at the three of them,

and Harry could practically feel the air in the room crackling from her anger. "First, congratulations on winning today, Harry. Perhaps you'll start getting letters from female fans who want to date you, so you won't have to change your snake into a girl any more." Draco Malfoy guffawed, holding his stomach. Harry winced at the tone in her voice, and even Mariah looked alarmed at the way she was addressing him. Ginny surveyed all three of them now. "So", she said at last, "Now that that's out of the way — it's probably about time we all talked, don't you think?" She was doing her best to be imperious, to be in charge, but Harry saw her chin give a small wobble, her lip shake momentarily, before she clenched her jaw muscles with fury and continued.

"Let's start with you, Mariah. Could you — oh, I'm not sure just how to put it — possibly be more of a *tart*?" Ginny's eyes glittered with malice, and Harry hoped her wand wasn't very handy.

Mariah was the calmest one in the room, for reasons Harry couldn't fathom. "Why do ye say that, Ginny? Because I was *there* for Draco when you got `im all waiked up in the greenhouses and then ran off?"

Ginny sputtered. "Ran off? Sprout caught us together! I've never been more embarrassed in my life! I was in just my bra and knickers; but *please* excuse me for feeling embarrassed by that. *You* obviously wouldn't understand..." Harry knew then that she was referring to what she'd seen when she'd held the amulet Saturday night; she sounded very acerbic, but he looked at her carefully again and saw that chin wobble, and knew that she had to be as hard as ice so that she wouldn't break down as she had in the common room the previous evening. It was her only defense.

Ginny looked around at the three of them. "Why do I get the impression that all of us here know why I was staying with Draco and that I shouldn't go on pretending any more?"

Draco Malfoy grimaced. "Well, personally, *I* was pretending publicly that it was my devastating charm, wit and good looks, but I'm getting a very bad feeling that you might be about to say something else."

Ginny sneered at him now. "Oh, well spotted, Draco. You finally figured it out. It only took — what? A year? You're very quick, you are. I can see why you're top in your year. Oh, wait — that's not you. That's Hermione. Muggle-born Hermione", she added, glaring at him. Draco Malfoy, however, wasn't feeling inclined to let the abuse continue.

"I'll have you know it did *not* take me the better part of a year to figure it out. In my defense, I can say that I was in a little thing called *denial*." He was practically shouting in her face, then abruptly, he grew very quiet. "I knew, all right. I just — didn't want to believe it." His emotions seemed to be all over the place; he became truculent again. "You know, if you'd fallen out of love with me, you might have just *said* so and ended it", he whinged. "Instead, you kept giving me *hope*, when you never bloody intended to follow through at all because you were still panting after *Potter!*"

Ginny looked back at him, very level, not denying it. "Yes", she said finally. "I — I still had feelings for Harry. And for a while I had feelings for you too, and I was confused. But the more you pressed me, the less I felt for you... until I knew that I wasn't in love with you at all, and that I'd made a dreadful mistake. Unfortunately, by then, it was too late."

Malfoy frowned. "Too late? Too bloody late for *what?*"

She shrugged. "Too late for a lot of things. I thought it was too late for Harry to be interested in me, as he was with Hermione; too late for me to say, 'Oh, sorry I made you think I was interested in you, which was one of the reasons why you helped put your dad in prison...' " She halted, reddening. "I mean — you *did* do a good thing. And I felt like — like it would be throwing it in your face to leave you. I felt — trapped."

Draco Malfoy grimaced. "That's what a bloke wants to hear — that his girlfriend has felt 'trapped' for a year. Bloody marvelous."

Ginny did in fact look very contrite. "I'm — I'm sorry. I did once have feelings for you, but —"

He put his hand up. "I know, I know. Listen, my ego doesn't need to hear every blow-by-blow moment of how you fell out of love with me. I rather got the impression that you decided Potter here was supposed to deflower you, not me, and no one else would do."

Ginny glanced at Harry furtively and turned bright red. "As you can probably guess, even when I had feelings for you, your *tact* isn't something I found to be your most attractive feature", she said to Draco acidly.

Malfoy smirked now and posed against the glass trophy case. "Oh? And what *did* you consider to be my most attractive feature? You did *almost* sleep with me."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Well, it wasn't your capacity for *humility*, I'll tell you that. This isn't *all* about sex, you know. I was frankly getting quite

tired of everything coming down to that; if I cared about you, I'd do it. Do you want to know something? Do you?" She came very close to him, her mouth a mere inch away from his, her chest pressed against his. Harry could see that Malfoy's breathing had sped up. "I wanted you so badly sometimes it *hurt*. But I wasn't in love with you and didn't want to sleep with you just because it would be a physical release, and because I had cause to believe I'd enjoy it a great deal. That wasn't the issue for me. I was afraid that if I gave in — not to *you*, but to *myself* — it would be tantamount to saying that I was still in love with you. And yes, I know I'd said the words. And when I did say it, I really did mean it. But if we — well, I thought you'd take that to mean —" She reddened and stepped away from him. "Believe me, I was trying to *avoid* leading you on as much as possible. That's why I didn't sleep with you. But it was getting harder and harder... Finally, just before we had to all go into the forest to rescue you and Professor Snape, I was considering just ending it with you and starting my life fresh —"

Malfoy didn't change his pose. "— which was after Potter broke up with Granger, if I recall correctly —"

"— but then I found out — something — which made me think that might not be the best idea in the world..."

Malfoy frowned at first, then widened his eyes. Harry wasn't sure what Ginny meant, but then, just before Malfoy opened his mouth to speak he realized what she meant, and the thought formed in his mind as Draco Malfoy said the words:

"The Obedience Charm."

Ginny nodded. "Right."

Malfoy ran his fingers through his fine, pale hair, pacing back and forth on the cold, hard stone floor. "Bloody hell. You thought that if you left me for Potter, I'd just go off and become You-Know-Who's right hand man and do whatever he wanted me to — like kill your precious Harry. Isn't that right?"

Ginny gave a small shrug. "Among other things. I'd be lying if I denied that the thought crossed my mind. Although, to be fair, I was glad that you didn't become a meal for a giant spider. So — well, you see the position I was in. You had the charm on you, you already hated Harry... It really didn't take much imagination to think of what you might do if I left you for him."

Malfoy crossed his arms and glared at the two of them. "So the two of you cooked up this plan to keep me frustrated as hell? Is that it?"

Harry threw up his hands. "I didn't know anything about this yet."

"Yet", Malfoy repeated, looking at Harry with narrowed eyes.

"As far as I knew, she was still in love with you", Harry said, looking sideways at Ginny. "I had no reason to believe otherwise."

Malfoy looked at Ginny again. "So this was all your idea, then? To be a complete tease?"

Ginny looked at him with her arms crossed on her chest, then moved her gaze to Mariah. "Oh, yes, I had a great deal of fun teasing *myself*, letting you kiss me and — and touch me, so that Harry might remain safe, while not giving myself permission to just — just give in —" Harry felt his stomach clench as he saw how her breath caught, remembering. "But I had a feeling that you wouldn't be frustrated for long, that there was someone at hand perfectly willing to help you with your little `problem'."

Mariah glared back at her. "Why coodn't ye have jest lait `im go? I'd have made `im see there was nothing to be gained by his goin' after Harry..."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Oh, yes, right. If You-Know-Who had come after Draco and told him to kill Harry, you really would have told him to disobey the order and die. I'm so sure. What do you take me for? All right, you're not like some of the other Slytherins, but I don't think for a minute that you would let Draco do something that would be guaranteed to end with his death. You'd advise him obey any order You-Know-Who gave him if it meant he would still be safe afterward. At least I had some hope of influencing Draco to do the right thing if You-Know-Who ever tried to use the Obedience Charm to manipulate him." She looked at Draco levelly now. "No, I'm not saying I *want* you to die. But I don't want a lot of things to happen that have..."

The chin wobble was back, and Harry wondered what she was thinking. Draco Malfoy was looking at her desperately; he seemed to believe her now about being as frustrated as him. It seemed to be some small consolation to him that she wasn't completely immune to his attempts at seduction, while this same knowledge was making Harry feel as though he might go insane. He remembered her writhing in his arms, behind Hagrid's hut on her fifteenth birthday... It also became clear that, no matter how

upset he was with her, Draco Malfoy didn't want to lose her, either. "Ginny, please forgive me. I — I didn't know what was going on in your head."

She crossed her arms and looked dispassionately at him. "So that's why you shagged that Muggle girl in the hedge maze this summer?"

His jaw dropped. "But — but I thought you believed that letter I wrote —"

She laughed loudly. "What kind of ninny do you think I am? All right, let me tell you what you did — you felt tempted to sleep with her and did, then realized that Harry or Katie or both of them would tell me about it —"

He was looking at her with his fists clenched by his sides. "No! I mean, yeah — I felt tempted. But when I did it — it was in a damn public space. And that was on *purpose*. Because I *wanted* Potter and Bell to tell you. To *hurt* you. To see if you had any feelings *left* to hurt. That was my original intention, anyway..." He stopped, swallowing. "But then", he went on more quietly, "I had second thoughts. About you being hurt. And about you leaving me. I love you, Ginny..." he trailed off softly, and despite the infidelity, Harry believed him.

Ginny looked at him shrewdly. "And what about the times last year when you were sneaking around with Mariah in the middle of the night?"

Malfoy looked nervously at Mariah now. "Well — I *was* feeling rather frustrated then..." He reddened. "And Mariah said — well, no strings attached —"

Harry glanced at her; she'd been lying. She very much wanted there to be strings attached. Ginny could see this too. She sighed. "Poor little tart. Fell for the biggest rogue at the school, and thought he'd get down on bended knee and propose if you accommodated him, eh?" Ginny's voice had a nasty edge to it. Mariah bristled.

"I thought that after a time he might come to his sainses and see what was right in front o' him instead o' hankerin' after what he couldn' have", she told Ginny with her chin in the air. Ginny's glare was utter hatred.

"Is that why you seduced Harry, too?"

Draco Malfoy's jaw dropped. "What the hell —?"

Ginny laughed. "Oh, you didn't know your little mistress was cheating on you? Last night, they were down in the tunnels going at it. Rutting like animals —"

"We stopped!" Harry said quickly. "Erm, what I mean is —" He felt himself reddening. Draco Malfoy was looking rather upset.

"*What the hell happened?*" he said to Harry and Mariah, red-faced now from fury, not embarrassment.

Harry swallowed and pointed. "I have a perfectly good excuse. She's a selkie!" he said, pointing an accusatory finger at Mariah.

For the first time, Ginny looked shocked. "A *what?*"

Mariah nodded. "Aye", she said briefly, before removing her fingerless gloves and spreading her fingers, so Ginny could see the webbing there. Harry could see that Ginny didn't know what to do now.

"But", he said quickly; "Mariah said she never used her selkie wiles to get Malfoy to sleep with her. She'd never used them at all until last night —"

"No!" Draco Malfoy said quickly. "No, it's a lie! She used her selkie charms on me! That's why we — did stuff —"

Ginny looked back and forth between the three of them. "Oh, I just do *not* believe this is happening..."

Mariah looked very determined. "Waill, believe it. You saw us whain you touched the amulet, didn't ye?" Ginny looked even more shocked, and nodded dumbly. "You love *him*", she said pointing at Harry. "That's why you can see him when you touch it. I *wanted* ye to see the pair of us, to think that if ye didn't leave Draco once `n' fer all ye might lose *Harry*..."

Ginny gasped. "You *what?*"

Malfoy looked outraged. "Yeah! You *what?*"

Mariah looked smugly satisfied. "Well, here we all are, talkin' openly about all this, finally. It waiked. And now that you've seen me an' Harry in the amulet, I'd appreciate it if you'd hand it over —" She walked toward Ginny and put her hand on her neck, looking for the silver chain. Ginny backed away from her, holding her throat with her hand.

"I — I don't have it any more —"

Mariah looked very suspicious. "Oh, really? Then where the haill is it?"

Harry had a sudden inspiration. "Why don't you ask *Draco?*" he said, nodding at him. Mariah looked at him with narrowed eyes, seeing for the first time the silver chain on the back of Draco Malfoy's neck. She strode to him and swiftly pulled the amulet out of his shirt collar, gasping.

"What the haill? Why didn't ye taill me ye had this?"

"Erm", Malfoy said, taking the chain off over his head. "It was — it was meant to be a surprise."

He held it out to her, looking like it was the last thing he wanted to do. Mariah took it in her hand, holding it tightly, then closing her eyes for a few moments. When she opened them, she was smiling.

"It wairks", she said dreamily, looking at Draco with shining eyes. For his part, Draco Malfoy was glaring at Harry and Ginny.

"Well, I suppose you two are just off to happy-ever-after-land now..." he sneered. Harry swallowed. All of his protests to the contrary, he certainly sounded like it would take very little for him to decide to hurt Harry right now. Even if that involved being sucked back into the Death Eaters and putting his Dark Mark to some use.

Ginny turned her glare on Harry. "Don't be so sure. What I saw last night, when I held the amulet..." Her chin was shaking again. "I don't see how I could possibly forget that. You were *all over her!*" she said to Harry now, unshed tears hovering in her eyes. "Why should I believe that it was only because of her selkie wiles? She didn't use them on Draco. Why should I believe that you stopped?"

"Er, didn't you keep, er, watching?"

She looked appalled. "No! Of course not! What do you take me for?" Harry thought of the Omnioculars, and was very glad that he hadn't shown her the images of Mariah and Draco together. "After just a few moments — I'd seen quite enough!"

"But you have to believe me!" he said breathlessly. "I — I realized that the way I felt — it was similar to when the veelas came out on the field at the World Cup, and when I was under Imperius during my fourth year, when I was learning to beat it..."

Ginny looked at him with narrowed eyes, tapping her foot. "Right. *You* can beat Imperius. And yet — there you were. You're as bad as Draco! First you're in bed with Katie after dating her less than a month, then you're changing Sandy into a girl. I would say 'What's next?' but I know — it's screwing Mariah, and claiming that she *made* you do it. Oh, yes, when I saw the pair of you, she was really twisting your arm."

Harry's jaw was open, moving soundlessly. Draco Malfoy looked like Christmas had come early.

"No, really, Ginny. It wasn't like that —"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "You know, I haven't the slightest idea why I was ever afraid of anything happening to you should I break up with Draco. I only know one thing now", she said, her voice tight with rage. "I just have one thing to say to the three of you. *You can all go to hell.*"

She glared at each of them in turn briefly before turning on her heel and striding from the room. They looked at each other uncertainly. Harry stared after her, his heart feeling very strange and slow, as though it were only beating once a minute.

Draco Malfoy wasn't going to let all of this go without comment, however.

"So", he drawled, smirking at Harry. "You've been told to go to hell, too, Potter. Ha! I can't say I'm too happy about finding out about you and Mariah this way —" he said, an edge to his voice now; "— but at least you're not going to be with Ginny, either."

Harry felt an incredible urge to completely forgo magic and just punch Draco Malfoy very hard, as Ron had done on his sixteenth birthday. Harry turned and glared at them both, then moved swiftly out of the room before he lost control and did something to earn yet another detention.

* * *

The next morning, gathering to go running was a rather tense affair. Ginny wouldn't look at Harry, Mariah or Draco. Harry wanted nothing to do with the two Slytherins, while silently imploring Ginny to look at him. Hermione wouldn't look at Harry or the Slytherins, either, and Ron was morose. Tony and Ruth gamely tried to engage some of them in conversation, to no avail. It was a mess.

At breakfast, Hermione still wasn't speaking to Harry; she was sitting on one side of Ron and Harry on the other when Harry heard her gasp at the front page of *The Daily Prophet*. Ron ignored her, staring gloomily into his porridge, but she gently tapped his arm and said, "Ron — you might want to see this."

As she handed the paper to Ron, Harry could see that the lead story had Daisy Furuncle's byline on it. *I very much doubt Ron would want to see anything by her*, Harry thought irritably. He was, however, able to read over Ron's arm, and his eyes widened as he saw what was printed there...

HARRY POTTER'S BEST FRIEND IS WEREWOLF MONTY MATHERS' JOB ON THE LINE

Shockwaves are being felt throughout the wizarding world this morning as the news spreads that Montgomery Mathers' newest find, Chaser and Gryffindor Quidditch captain, Ronald Weasley, is in fact a werewolf. Weasley's appointment to the English team is in direct violation of the Restriction on Part-Human Quidditch Players instituted in 1928, originally intended to prevent the Ballycastle Bats from recruiting an all-vampire team.

Mathers insists that he was completely in the dark about Weasley's lycanthropy, and an investigation is underway to determine whether Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore and the school matron, Poppy Pomphrey, attempted to conceal this information from Mathers. Neither Pomphrey nor Dumbledore were available yesterday for comment; Minerva McGonagall, Hogwarts deputy headmistress and coincidentally Weasley's head-of-house, claimed that the headmaster was "under the weather" and in the care of the matron, so neither could comment as to the veracity of Mathers' assertion.

If the records show that Mathers was in fact informed of Weasley's condition, an inquiry will take place under the auspices of the World Quidditch Federation to determine whether Mathers will still lead the English team in future European Cup and World Cup play, as well as to determine whether he will retain his position with the Caerphilly Catapults.

If England had won yesterday's match against Wales, the results would have been null and void, requiring the match to be played over without Weasley. Ironically, it was Weasley's best friend, Gryffindor Seeker and Hogwarts Head Boy, Harry Potter, who won the match for Wales.

Soon after Potter caught the Snitch, he slipped from his broom and would surely have fallen to his death had not his friend caught him and carried him to safety. However, during the match itself, it is a wonder that someone else was not gravely injured due to Weasley's inordinate strength, which arguably gave England an unfair advantage. It is a wonder that England did not, in fact, win, and it gives one pause when one considers whether it is a coincidence that

Weasley's best friend caught the Snitch. Weasley certainly did not seem to bear his friend any ill-will after his side's loss, and as noted before, even saved him from a certain death.

Delving into Ministry records, this reporter was able to learn that Ronald Weasley was bitten by Remus Lupin last spring, during the infamous rescue of Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy from the Forbidden Forest on the Hogwarts grounds. During this incident, Ravenclaw prefect Evan Davies was killed, as well as former Bulgarian Seeker Viktor Krum. Azkaban inmate Peter Pettigrew was also apprehended, which in turn led to the exoneration of Sirius Black, now teaching Apparition at Hogwarts. At the time that he bit Weasley, Lupin was the Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor at the school. He has since been very wisely replaced by Arabella Figg, although Dumbledore's appointment of Black (a friend of Lupin's) as a teacher shows that he still does not care about outside opinion of his teaching appointments.

Unfortunately, it seems that anyone with knowledge of Weasley's condition was unlikely to know about the nearly-seventy-year-old rule against part-human players, and anyone who knew of the rule was unlikely to know of Weasley being bitten by Lupin. Other magical games and sports have not bothered to ban part-humans from play, and as a result, Weasley plans to participate in the annual broom race from Kopparberg to Arjeplog, Sweden, to take place on New Year's Eve, as always. Normally, when the spectators Apparate to Arjeplog to congratulate the survivors, there are numerous wounded players to tend to. This year, one may properly be afraid for the dragons instead, with a werewolf soon to be flying through their midst. The odds are expected to be very short on Weasley and reports are already coming in that other racers are viewing his participation as patently unfair. This reporter has already learned that most wizarding bookmakers are not taking any bets on Weasley, and some are despairing of getting any business at all related to the race, thanks to his participation. An emergency meeting of the Brotherhood of the Book is being called for next week to discuss whether to petition the Swedish Department of Magical Games and Sports to forbid Weasley's participation.

In related news, one bookmaker reportedly took a large number of bets on England from Hogwarts students who no doubt expected Weasley's side to win, due to his lycanthropy, and only the defeat of England is preventing an investigation into those bets. A separate investigation of that bookmaker is underway because it seems he took most of the bets from underage Hogwarts students.

Ron stared at the paper for a moment before looking up at Harry. "Did you see this, Harry?" Harry nodded, swallowing. Ron stared down at it again, his eyes wide. "Are they saying that — that I threw the game? That you shouldn't have won? Bloody hell, I'm damned if I do and I'm damned if I don't. If we'd won, it would have been a do-over because I'm a werewolf. Because we lost, I must have thrown it."

Harry grimaced. "Doesn't make me sound very good, either. As though I *couldn't* win without help from you."

Ron nodded. "Right. She's calling you incompetant and me a cheater and a turncoat. That cow... And talking about me injuring people! It says nothing about the fact that there was a Bludger targetting *you*..."

Harry looked down the page, seeing something else. "Hang on, Ron. I think — damn! It gets even worse..."

At the bottom of the front page was a story that also had Daisy Furuncle's name on it, in a black box that included a picture of Harry, Ron and Hermione together, smiling cheerfully for the camera, their Hogwarts robes fluttering in the breeze. Hermione looked back and forth between Ron and Harry. Harry recognized it as the photo Colin had taken that he and Ron had given Hermione for her birthday in fifth year. *How did that get in the paper?* But the real attention getter was the accompanying article...

A WEREWOLF AT HOGWARTS:
MERE FOLLY OR A GENUINE DANGER TO OTHER
STUDENTS?

Once again, Albus Dumbledore has a werewolf for a student at Hogwarts. The first time (as far as anyone knows, at any rate) it was Remus Lupin, who attended the school from 1971 to 1978 and was a good friend of Harry Potter's parents, James Potter and Lily Potter (nee Evans), as well as Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew. Lupin's werewolf status was kept hushed up by Dumbledore, despite his almost killing a student early in his seventh year, according to old rumors. Lupin's werewolf status did not become common knowledge until June 1994, when Hogwarts Potions Master Severus Snape revealed to his students in Slytherin House that Professor Lupin (who was teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts that year) was in fact a werewolf. Lupin resigned his post soon after, under pressure from a large number of parents who petitioned the Board of Governors. It is still unclear why Lupin was reinstated during the previous academic year. (In recent years Dumbledore has had a remarkably difficult time retaining professors for this particular class.) Some whispers that have met this reporter's ears say that Snape was also the student Lupin nearly killed while in school, which certainly squares with his telling his students of the danger represented by their werewolf professor.

According to reliable sources, Lupin was already a werewolf when he began attending the school, while Weasley was not bitten until the end of his sixth year. It would probably be far too much to expect of Dumbledore that he expel the Quidditch captain for his former house, Gryffindor, which is also the house headed up by his deputy, Minerva McGonagall, especially as a lycanthrope would be virtually impossible to beat in a match and school rules do not preclude participation by part-humans. However, this reporter has heard of some dangers that accompany living in close proximity with a werewolf that do not usually get much press, dangers that have traditionally been brushed under the carpet.

While Hogwarts' Snape is an accomplished brewer of Wolfsbane Potion, which allows a werewolf to transform but keep his human mind and thus be similar to a tame wolf during the three-night transformation, it does require the subject to cooperate in taking the potion every day for a week preceding the full moon. Teenage boys are not traditionally known for their adherence to routines such as this;

one hopes that Dumbledore is making certain that Weasley is taking his potion at the proper time.

The danger that is of greatest concern to this reporter, however, concerns a condition that afflicts werewolves just prior to the full moon and is not ameliorated by Wolfsbane Potion. During the twenty-four hours before the full moon rises, a werewolf feels an almost uncontrollable mania to engage in sexual activity with anyone — regardless of gender — who comes within close proximity. (Some reports say the proximity does not need to be very close at all.) Ministry records confirm that there are numerous werewolves who have been convicted of aggravated assault and rape on dates that coincide with the eve of the full moon. A werewolf living in a boarding school would seem to be a very bad idea considering this danger to his fellow students.

No information has been forthcoming from Albus Dumbledore about steps that have been taken to isolate Ronald Weasley from other students at this dangerous time. However, given that a student was nearly killed by Remus Lupin when he was in school, and he was still not expelled, it is possible that even a student being violently assaulted by Weasley will not be seen as cause for his expulsion by Dumbledore, although even he will not be able to prevent the law from taking action against Weasley if — or when — this seemingly-inevitable event occurs.

Harry saw now that the caption below the photograph said, *Ronald Weasley with his best friend, Harry Potter, and girlfriend, Hogwarts' Head Girl, Hermione Granger, in happier times. Could they be his first victims?*

Ron was shaking with rage. He balled up the paper and threw it in the large fireplace on the other side of the Gryffindor table, where it immediately flared up; he stormed out of the Great Hall before it was burnt away completely. Harry couldn't help notice that other students who had *Prophet* subscriptions were looking at Ron's exodus with barely-disguised laughter, or, in the case of some Slytherins, *open* laughter. Harry looked helplessly at Hermione, who was staring after Ron with a stricken look on her face.

"I suppose you saw the article at the bottom of the page..." Harry began. Hermione nodded, watching Ron's retreating back.

"I — I had no idea. That doesn't make it into the books on lycanthropy..."

Harry looked at her grimly. "It's the dirty little secret of being a werewolf. Except that, thanks to Daisy Furuncle, it's no secret any more." Then he looked at the other Gryffindor students, some of whom were passing other copies of the paper back and forth, their jaws dropping. "Come on", he said to her quietly. "This clearly isn't the place to discuss it." She nodded and followed him into the entrance hall, evidently having forgotten her anger with him over what he'd "done" to Ginny.

"Let's go up to class early", he suggested; they had Transfiguration first thing, and the other students wouldn't be along for a good twenty minutes. When they reached the room, Hermione turned to face Harry, looking rather haunted. She didn't take long to go into ranting mode.

"I wish he'd just *told* me about this! Is that why he looks so dreadful before the full moon? I thought it was just his body getting ready for the change in a general sort of way —"

Harry shook his head. "No. Lupin talked to him about it, after the first night Ron transformed. He said when he was young, he just felt sort of extra hungry right before. When he reached adolescence, it became a — how did he say it? — a *carnal* urge of a different sort..."

Hermione swallowed. "Oh", was all she said, in a very small voice. She walked slowly to the window and Harry joined her. Suddenly, they saw Ron running across the grounds, heading for the Whomping Willow. He broke a branch off a tree growing about twenty feet away from it and used this to hit the knot on the tree roots that would freeze the branches. They watched him disappear into the tunnel and the willow begin to wave its appendages again.

"I don't think we'll be seeing much of him today", Harry said, putting his hand on her arm protectively. "This is terribly embarrassing for him. He obviously needs time alone. We can make his excuses to the teachers. Probably no one will blame him who's seen that article..."

"But — but perhaps *you* can talk to him —" she said hopefully.

Harry shook his head. "He feels like — like jumping on *anyone* nearby, Hermione, male or female. Lupin said — said a lot of things, actually, which I probably shouldn't tell you. They're private. But — now this part

of Ron's life isn't private any more. It's been plastered all over the paper, for the entire world to see. Oh, god — his *mum* will see it", he breathed softly. He hated to think what Molly Weasley would make of her youngest son's dilemma. "Bloody mess..."

Suddenly Hermione pulled back from him, bristling. "And you! What's your excuse? You're not a werewolf! Why couldn't you keep your hands off Mariah Kirkner, when you claim to love Ginny? Do you know what a state she was in Saturday night? What a state she's *still* in? You saw her this morning!"

Harry looked very levelly at her. "Mariah is a selkie, Hermione."

She stopped and opened her mouth, then closed it again. "She's a — *oh*. I — I didn't know..." Then she frowned. "Why didn't you tell Ginny that?"

He sighed. "I did. She told me to go to hell anyway. And Mariah. And Draco Malfoy."

She snorted. "Well, it's not before time for that. But wait — is that why *he* was with Mariah? Because she's a selkie?" Hermione seemed to be as reluctant as him to provide Draco Malfoy with a way to explain away his behavior.

Harry shrugged. "Who knows, really? Mariah claims she didn't use her selkie wiles on him. I don't know what to think now. All I know is that I pulled back from Mariah when I realized my head felt funny, like when the veelas appeared at the World Cup, and I'm *still* punished, and even one of my best friends is treating me like a piece of filth." He looked meaningfully at her with his eyebrows raised. Hermione grimaced and relented.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't know. She was *very* upset. Crying on me, ranting about you... Do you want me to talk to her?" she said quietly, trying to be helpful.

He shook his head. "What good would it do? She knows. She knows everything, and she still doesn't want anything to do with me."

They looked helplessly at each other. Harry couldn't believe what a mess their private lives had become since he'd broken up with her. Or rather, since he'd first made a move to kiss her in the garden on Privet Drive, when she'd still been under the influence of the Imperius Potion. He still wished he'd known all along that it was a potion affecting her behavior that year...

A potion.

That made him remember the part of the article that mentioned that Dumbledore was "under the weather." And then he remembered Aberforth saying the same thing, when Harry had asked him why his brother wasn't at the match. It didn't seem right for Dumbledore to be ill for an extended period of time. Harry couldn't remember it happening in this previous six years at school. Which meant he either was being affected by a potion or being attacked by someone in some other way, or — he wasn't really sick. He looked at Hermione earnestly.

"I have to go." His last word was nearly drowned out by the shrill bell marking the end of breakfast, giving the students five minutes to reach their morning classes. Hermione looked at her watch and frowned.

"But class is starting soon", she said, sounding very much like the Head Girl again.

"I know. Tell McGonagall that I — I had to go see Dumbledore. It's true."

"Dumbledore? Why?"

"To find out why he wasn't at the match yesterday."

Hermione sighed and threw up her hands. "Don't you think he has better things to do than watch a Quidditch match? I mean — yes, *I* was there. But you and Ron were both playing..."

"That's it exactly, Hermione. I *do* fully expect him to have better things to do than watch a Quidditch match. That's exactly why I'm going to see him — I want to find out *what those things are*."

Hermione's eyes lit up as she realized his meaning. He turned to go, but a moment later, she was striding along beside him. He stopped and gawped at her. She didn't stop, so he started moving again, having to actually strain a little to keep up with her.

"Hermione — what the hell?"

She didn't look at him but continued to face straight ahead, moving purposefully. "Do you think you're the only one who wants to find out why Dumbledore wasn't at the match?" she asked him as she picked up speed. Harry smiled and sped up himself, shaking his head, and they reached the gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledore's office just as the bell rang marking the beginning of the first class of the day. Clearly, Hermione had no compunctions about using her Head Girl status to avoid being punished for tardiness. Besides, it wasn't as though either of them were doing poorly

in Transfiguration — they *had* both mastered the Animagus Transfiguration already.

Harry gave the password to the gargoyle, and it moved out of the way, allowing them to enter and move up to Dumbledore's office on the moving spiral stairs. When they reached the door, it was slightly ajar, and they pushed it open uncertainly. The headmaster was not in his office, but they heard his voice coming from behind another partially-open door on the other side of the room. Feeling rather conspicuous, and trying not to be bothered by some of the portraits of former headmasters and headmistresses, who had awoken and were frowning deeply at him, he moved cautiously toward the other door, Hermione right behind him.

"— wish you would stop this!" they heard Professor McGonagall. They looked at each other, eyebrows raised. McGonagall would be late to class at this rate, which was unheard-of for her.

"Minerva", came a weak-sounding, raspy version of Dumbledore's voice, "you're the one who's been telling me for years about the things I haven't been *willing* to do. I'm willing now, and yet you tell me to stop. You knew that this would have a price, as I did also. If I stop, it will all have been for nought. Hasn't it been quiet lately? Hasn't it been nice? Do you want Harry's scar to start hurting him again?"

They heard McGonagall make a huffing noise. "In spite of that, someone *was* trying to hurt Harry yesterday. Someone charmed a Bludger to go after him..."

Dumbledore sighed, producing an eerie sound that rattled through his chest. "He had people looking out for him there. The operatives, Aurors... I trusted that they would protect him from any dangers. And he's fine, isn't he?"

"You're not", she said, speaking more softly; she seemed both to be chiding him and sympathizing.

That painful rattle again. "I will be, Minerva. It's more of a strain than I expected, but it does seem that it has proven somewhat effective..."

"And how much longer can you go on like this? What if he manages to overcome you? Or worse..."

There was a long pause. "Then we will be no worse off than we were before, and perhaps better, as we will know for certain that a particular avenue is no longer open to us. This is not without its risks, Minerva; why do you think I hesitated to take this step the first time he was in power?"

Don't worry about me. Poppy will be by presently with my potion, and I will feel a little better. You should go teach... the students are unattended..."

"No, they'll be fine. Harry and Hermione are in my first class. I daresay the Head Boy and Head Girl, not to mention two Animagi, can find ways to keep the class occupied until I get there."

They looked at each other in alarm and did their best to quietly slip out of the room again, then went as quickly as they could down the spiral stairs and ran with their hearts in their throats back to the Transfiguration classroom. When they arrived, they encountered more than a little pandemonium, but soon, with help from the other prefects (Malfoy was oddly helpful, throwing Harry sly looks out of the corner of his eye that Harry didn't like) the class settled down, and they were in small groups, transfiguring their desk chairs, when McGonagall arrived. She nodded with approval at Harry and Hermione, and, as far as Harry knew, no one ever told her that the Head Girl and Boy hadn't been present when the bell had rung for the start of class.

* * *

At lunchtime, Harry and Hermione didn't eat in the Great Hall, but went down to the kitchens to fetch some food to take to Ron. They didn't discuss what they'd heard in the headmaster's office that morning.

When they were near — but not too near — the Whomping Willow, Hermione did a banishing charm on a small stone that landed with pinpoint precision on the knot that would freeze the tree's branches. Harry shook his head, smiling. "Well, I can summon things. I suppose your specialty is banishing..."

But this didn't seem to make her very happy. "Yes", she said miserably. "I seem to be very good at banishing *boyfriends*..."

He grimaced; she didn't usually wallow in self-pity. *Well, not much, anyway.* "Hermione", he said, chiding her gently.

She didn't respond but went ahead of him into the tunnel leading them to the reconstructed Shrieking Shack. As they drew nearer, they heard some very loud bangs and grunts, as though someone was hurling a large dresser about inside the house, and when they reached the interior, which still smelled of new-sawn wood, Ron wasn't in the first room they came to, and the banging noises were considerably louder.

Hermione looked like she wanted to hold her ears, but as she was holding a large pitcher of pumpkin juice with both hands, she could not, and merely winced at every impact. He was manually carrying a rather heavy picnic hamper, wishing he'd thought to levitate it. The noise would make it impossible to concentrate enough now to perform just about any spell. Harry already felt a headache coming on from the racket.

They followed the banging noises up the stairs, staying near the wall and away from the rickety banister, which appeared to have been attacked. Some of the balusters looked like they'd been yanked out of the stair treads and used to beat the rest of the railing into submission; there were a number of smashed balusters, sharp splintery bits sticking out at odd angles, the fresh smell of the broken wood starting to make Harry's nose tickle.

They found him in a room at the end of the upstairs corridor; after the fire, the house had been rebuilt, but not refurnished, and they discovered that, with the lack of furniture to attack, Ron had resorted to dissecting the house itself. He was hurling himself at what had been a six-paneled door, kicking it into smithereens, then putting his fist through another door on the opposite side of the room, with moves Harry had only ever seen in martial arts films on television late at night (and probably enhanced by special effects technology). Ron didn't need "special effects." The house would be dismantled by morning at this rate.

"Ron!" Harry bellowed, trying to interrupt the Shrieking Shack's destruction.

Ron stopped, poised to leap again. He turned, but looked unsurprised at seeing them. "Smelled you coming", he said, panting, sweat dripping off his bare chest. He was wearing only his trousers; his other clothes and his robes were in a pile in the corner. Curling red covered his torso, and the hair on his arms was thicker than usual as well, as it was only about thirty hours before the full moon. Harry knew it would grow thicker still as the hours passed. Ron pushed his sweaty hair off his forehead with the back of his hand and sniffed the air. "Chicken? Didn't they have any ham? For some reason I feel like ham today. Or rabbit. That would have been good, too. Something gamy."

He seemed determined not to discuss the Daisy Furuncle articles and Harry glanced at Hermione to see what she was going to do.

She set the pitcher down on the floor and sat, saying to him, "Come have some lunch, Ron. We brought what we could. The elves were busy getting lunch ready for the rest of the school. We'll stay and eat with you, keep you company." Her voice was shaking a little, and Harry saw her eyes furtively going toward the splintered doors.

Harry set down the hamper and started taking plates out of it for the food. "Yeah. Come on. Can't destroy an entire house on an empty stomach", he tried to joke. No one laughed.

It was an awkward lunch and Harry and Hermione packed up again as quickly as possible. "I'll leave the hamper here, Ron. There's some food in it you can have for dinner. I suppose by then —" He swallowed. Ron nodded.

"By then I won't be fit for human company. Somehow — somehow knowing that everyone *knows* is just making me feel worse. It's making me feel like — like —" He swallowed, a fine sheen of sweat on his upper lip and his brow as he gazed at Hermione, his chest heaving. She looked somewhat startled, but did not back away or flee; she continued to gaze back at him. Harry could see a red light in Ron's eyes, and wondered whether, if he lunged for Hermione, he should let him or tear her away from him. And then Ron turned and looked at Harry, not saying anything, and Harry was startled to see lust in the gaze directed at *him* as well. *This* he had not been expecting.

Ron shuddered, then sat down abruptly in a lotus position; he closed his eyes and put his hands palm-up on his knees, emitting a low humming noise, as though he was desperate to do something that would not make him feel like he wanted to attack both of them. He still looked as though his breathing was far too fast, and Harry could see a vein pulsing quickly in his temple, his nostrils flaring as he continued to breathe in Harry and Hermione's scents.

Harry stood and took Hermione's hand, starting to back away; Ron seemed to be attempting to control himself using something Remus Lupin had taught him. Hopefully it would work...

"We should go", Harry croaked out; his throat didn't seem to be working quite right. Without opening his eyes to look at them, Ron nodded vigorously, still humming and meditating, but still looking like he might jump them at any second. As they left, Harry saw how he was shivering,

how much of an effort it was for him not to come after them. *It'll only get worse*, Harry knew.

They pattered quickly down the steps; Harry felt like his own heartbeat was abnormally fast, and he could see that Hermione was looking flushed and panicky as well. When he reached the bottom, Harry yelled up the stairs, "We'll come in the morning with some breakfast for you! And Snape will bring your Wolfsbane Potion!"

"Don't come without him!" Ron cried. "It's not a good idea!" Harry thought about this; how had the Potions Master been coping with giving Ron his potion just before the full moon? But then again — Snape was an adult wizard, who probably would have no trouble hexing Ron if he tried to pull anything funny. *Ron attacking Snape*. Now *there* was a weird thought...

"All right! See you then!"

"Right! Now sod off!" The humming resumed, louder.

"We're going!" Harry called, urging Hermione toward the tunnel. She didn't need prodding though, and was down under the ground again and running through the passage a good twenty feet ahead of Harry. When they'd stopped the branches again and emerged from the tunnel, they both collapsed on the ground just beyond the reach of the willow. Hermione's face was pale and drawn and she looked up at Harry forlornly.

"He looked very bad", she said simply. He nodded.

"I helped him stay away from others at this time last month, but it's not easy, when you can't say what the problem is..."

She looked at him, her eyes narrowed. "So — he'd even — even do it with *you* if you were —"

Harry nodded grimly. "Yeah. But he doesn't want to do that, obviously. We don't have *that sort* of friendship."

"But — but maybe *I* could —"

"Hermione — you saw what he was doing to the Shrieking Shack. Would you rather that was *you*? Ron loves you. He doesn't want you hurt."

She swallowed. "I see what you mean", she said softly. She looked back sadly at the tree, the branches waving wildly against the sky.

They needed to go back to the castle, to meet Sirius and the other seventh-year Gryffindors and Slytherins to go into the village for their Apparition lesson, which was something Ron could never do. She got to

her feet; Harry wrapped an arm around her shoulder protectively, and she sighed and leaned her head on him as they walked back to the castle.

* * *

At least Hermione's speaking to me again, Harry thought as they sat together at a table near the windows in the common room, writing essays about some of the more spectacular splinching incidents of the early twentieth century. Sirius had started letting some of them carefully Apparate a short distances — just a yard or two, although soon they would try from one side of the village hall to the other. They all had to make certain that there was no furniture around them, in case they splinched a chair into their bodies. Some of the Slytherins had laughed about this precaution, so Sirius had testily assigned a three-foot long splinching essay to the entire class, so they would know that it was no laughing matter.

Harry looked up at where Ginny sat near the fire with Ruth Pelta, Zoey Russell and Annika Olafsdottir. They were doing homework for Sprout, also writing essays, and Ginny looked very serious. She raised her eyes to his at one point, no longer looking angry with him but just very, very sad.

"Oh, bother!" Ruth said, throwing down her quill. "I'll never get this right — Tony!" she called to her boyfriend across the room, where he was playing cards with his dormmate, Colin Creevey. "Are you done your homework for Sprout?"

"Well, kind of", Tony said sheepishly. "I just wrote some things off the top of my head. I'll probably get the lowest mark in the class. Just wanted to get it over with..." Ruth rolled her eyes at him. Harry tried not to smile; Tony and Ruth were suddenly reminding him of Ron and Hermione (in happier times). "Ask Neville for help", Tony said, nodding at where Neville was cleaning Trevor's terrarium. "He's Mr. Herbology."

Neville raised his head at the mention of his name. "Huh?" he said, holding a box of Mrs. Scower's magical cleansing powder in one hand and a cleaning flannel in the other.

Ginny smiled warmly at him. "You're the resident expert in Herbology, Neville. Care to help us sixth-year girls with some essays for Sprout?" Harry saw Neville's jaw drop, and then he swallowed. He practically threw down the things in his hands and ran across the room to the girls; Ginny slid down onto the floor in front of her chair and patted the rug next to her. "Sit here, Neville. Tell me, is *this* the proper name of the genus of the

Flowering Worrywort, or is *this* —?" she said, pointing to her parchment with a long quill.

Harry saw that their heads were very close together, their voices getting lower. He swallowed, then looked down, trying not to jump across the room and throttle Neville. He felt a hand on his then, and looked up, saw Hermione gazing at him sympathetically. He nodded at her. She didn't remove her hand and he turned his over, clasping hers tightly; she was all he had to hold onto right now, and he was all she had.

After dinner, she kissed him goodnight on the cheek and whispered in his ear, "She might come round, you know." She glanced at Ginny, who was sitting with Neville and laughing at something he'd said; Neville, for his part, looked rather shocked, and then pleased that he'd amused her. Harry leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

"So will Ron. You'll see." She nodded, but didn't look convinced, and followed Parvati and Lavender up the stairs.

* * *

When he arrived downstairs in the common room, Hermione, Ruth and Tony were ready for running, but Ruth said Ginny wasn't coming. Then, when they arrived in the entrance hall, they didn't find Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner there, so after they prepared themselves for running, they left, just the four of them. Harry felt it was far pleasanter than the day before; the four of them chatted amiably and helped each other stretch before and after and do sit-ups, and it was remarkable how much better Harry felt after a morning run that was devoid of the kind of tension he'd experienced the day before. He and Hermione went down to the kitchens afterward and acquired some breakfast and lunch for Ron — as much meat as possible, plus eggs for even more protein. Then they went to the Potions dungeon and found Snape preparing to leave, carrying a stoppered vial half-full of potion that was sending smoke into the empty half, filling the void. He nodded at them and they all left the castle for the Whomping Willow. As Harry stilled the branches with the same tree branch Ron had used the day before, Sandy hissed at him, and he froze for a moment. *Oh, no*, he thought. *Please don't mean what I think you mean...*

They proceeded through the tunnel silently. Harry's heartbeat seemed to be so loud (to him) he was surprised Snape and Hermione didn't comment on it. When they reached the Shrieking Shack, it was deathly quiet, and Harry felt somehow that this wasn't a good thing. They walked

cautiously up the steps. Harry suddenly wished there were a lot more of them, so it would take that much longer to reach Ron... They went down the upstairs corridor, finally coming to the room where they'd eaten lunch the day before. Harry hesitated before opening the door, and the moment he did, he saw immediately that his worst fears about what Sandy had said were confirmed.

Ron wasn't alone.

Hearth

Harry pushed Hermione behind him the moment he saw the two intertwined bodies on the pile of robes. Snape immediately waved his wand and conjured a blanket, covering both bodies — Ron's freckled pallor and Parvati's pale-brown curves, which were covered in some rather severe-looking scratches...

The fish has come to the wolf.

Harry remembered Sandy's words; he had hoped she hadn't meant what he thought she did, but that wasn't going to change anything. He felt Hermione trembling behind him as he tried to keep her from seeing, but he also knew it was too late. She knew. *She knew...*

Ron started to wake sleepily and opened his eyes just a bit, looking down at Parvati, not at the open door; then Hermione moved out from behind Harry and her footstep made a floorboard creak. Ron's eyes flew open all the way and he looked horrified, sitting up and making the blanket that Snape had conjured fall off their upper bodies.

"Hermione!" was all that Ron said. Harry turned to look at her; her face had crumpled and she turned and fled with a strangled cry. He turned back to Ron and Parvati, and this time, he noticed that Parvati didn't seem to be moving. *Oh, god, no...*

Snape seemed to notice at the same moment. He strode forward and turned Parvati over, moving the blanket so that she was properly covered again. Ron blinked, still not fully awake. Snape laid Parvati flat on the floor, opening her eyes with his fingers, one at a time, and gazing into them. Then he moved his hands over her head, finally dwelling on the back of her skull, where it was in contact with the floor. He seemed to have decided what was wrong with her, and he looked up at Harry, reminding him extraordinarily of his step-father.

"Spot of concussion, I'd say. Hopefully nothing worse. Rather large lump on the back of her head. Her breathing is shallow and she's lost a bit of blood from her wounds. I'll get her and Weasley back to the hospital wing; you should probably go after Miss Granger and make certain she's all right", he said grimly. Harry marveled at how he could be so clinical;

he knew that his experience of almost being killed by Remus Lupin had stayed with him for many years.

Harry knew he was right; Snape was perfectly able to help Parvati and Ron, but it was up to him to help Hermione. He nodded and turned, running down the corridor and stairs, leaping down the last few treads, lighting his wand and dashing through the tunnel in a crouch so that he wouldn't hit his head on the outcroppings and roots.

At last, he saw movement ahead, but he quickly realized that it was shadows from the flailing branches of the willow. He reached through the roots, stilling the tree's wild dance, and ran out of the tunnel and far enough away from the tree that he wouldn't be hit when it started to move again. He turned in frantic circles, trying to see which way Hermione had run, and finally saw that her legs were pumping furiously as she ran flat-out for Hagrid's hut. He looked around furtively for a moment, decided that it just plain didn't matter if anyone saw him, and changed into his griffin form. He took a couple of running steps and leapt into the air, moving his wings back and forth vigorously, soon overtaking her and spiraling down behind Hagrid's hut.

Hagrid happened at just that moment to be opening his back door, to do his morning gardening, and he yelled out in surprise when he saw a golden griffin landing in his pumpkin patch, folding his gossamer wings against tawny flanks. Harry looked up at his friend, panicking, as he hadn't told Hagrid about being an Animagus. Hagrid looked more shocked than Harry had ever seen him.

"Huh!" he boomed. "A golden griffin! Are ye by any chance that one me mum used to see, flyin' over the forest?" he asked, as though it could speak.

Well, Harry thought, *I might as well admit it*. He moved his head up and down very distinctly. It was unmistakably a nod. Hagrid looked floored.

"Well, I'll be —"

Harry loped forward with his rolling lion's gait and pushed his wet nose at Hagrid's hand. Hagrid grinned down at him and stroked his mane, shaking his own head. "I'll jest bet ye'd like a nice joint o' mutton, eh?" he said in a gruff, friendly way; Hagrid had met very few magical beasts he didn't like, and even though he didn't know that this was Harry, somehow he seemed to know that the griffin was a friend.

Hagrid led him into the hut; Harry walked to the hearth rug and sat down on it, his front paws lined up in front of him while Hagrid went to the larder. A moment later, Hermione had evidently reached the hut; Harry heard her pounding on the door. Hagrid checked the clock on his mantel. The first bell was going to ring for the beginning of classes in about ten minutes. He looked like he thought he might be dreaming to have two visitors at this time, when students should be on their way to various classrooms. He strode to the front door of the hut and opened it.

"Hermione!" he cried in surprise when he saw her, completely flummoxed. Tears were streaming down her face.

"Oh — Ha — Ha — *Hagrid!*" she choked. Then she noticed Harry sitting decorously on the floor near the fire. "Harry!" she cried gratefully, springing across the room and throwing her arms around his neck. She buried her face in his mane and it was soon wet with her tears; he nuzzled her cheek with his nose and let her hug him and cry on him in his griffin form, thinking that this was probably even more comforting than if he'd been his usual human self. Harry looked up at Hagrid with his large green eyes (rather than the usual amber eyes that golden griffins tended to have) and Hagrid opened his own eyes very wide, seeing it now, seeing the truth.

"Blimey!" Hagrid cried, sitting down heavily in the oversized leather chair he used by the fireside. "*Harry?*" he asked tentatively, staring at the griffin. Harry slowly nodded his head again, but soon went back to trying to comfort Hermione. He put a paw across her shoulders and felt her cheek on his mane. At length, his inner motor, the constant purr, seemed to quieten her, and they just crouched on the hearth rug together, human and beast, giving and receiving comfort.

* * *

When Hermione was all cried out, Harry changed back into his human form and stood, feeling like his bones would cry out in pain if they had voices. He hadn't really had time to prepare for the transfiguration, and, as he always did when he executed an abrupt change into his Animagus form, he felt it in his joints afterward. He tried to shake out his arms and legs, and when he was done, Hermione was looking at him forlornly, so he found that he had to take her in his arms again and hold her and rock her some more. She started to open her mouth, but Harry stopped her with a gentle hand on her arm.

"Hagrid", he said, looking at the half-giant; "I know this is your place and all, but do you think — we need to talk for a bit —"

Hagrid squinted at him in non-comprehension at first, then his eyes opened wide and he lumbered to his feet. "Oh, yeah, o'course ye can have some privvacy. I don' have a class firs' thing today, but me third year Hufflepuffs `n' Ravenclaws'll be along soon for theirs... I'll just, er — be over in the paddock with the unicorns, if ye need anythin' —"

When Hagrid had closed the door behind him, Harry made Hermione sit in the large chair by the fire that Hagrid had vacated (when she sat back all the way her feet didn't touch the floor) and began to heat some water for tea. They were silent as Harry moved about, handing her a cup and saucer, putting the tea leaves in the teapot. When the tea was steeped and poured and Harry had added some milk to his, the white swirling into the brown, they still hadn't spoken. He finally said something, just to fill the silence. "We missed Charms. And soon we'll be missing History of Magic", he said quietly. Then he wished he hadn't spoken, as these things sounded unbearably banal.

However, Hermione behaved as though the silence were still unbroken. She sipped her tea and then said suddenly, "You're going to tell me it isn't his fault." Her voice was still a little thick with tears.

Harry sat next to her chair on the same low stool he'd been using since he first came to Hagrid's hut when he was eleven. "It *isn't*, Hermione. Okay, he should have told you sooner; you shouldn't have had to find out through that Daisy Furuncle article..."

"No, I mean — I *know* it isn't his fault, Harry."

Harry heaved a sigh of relief. "I'm so glad to hear you say that, Hermione. I thought — well, you rather reminded me of Ginny when — well, you know —"

Hermione squinted at him as though he were speaking some language other than English. "What are you talking about?"

Harry stared back at her in mutual noncomprehension. "What do you mean, `What are you talking about?' You know — when Ginny saw me in the amulet with Mariah and was so upset —"

Hermione's eyes widened. "Oh — *that's* what you meant." Harry was baffled. Why was she acting like it had been ten years or something?

"Um, yes. Well anyway, I think clearly the problem lies with Parvati —"

Hermione shook her head. "Partly, yes. But if Daisy Furuncle hadn't written that article —" Harry could tell she was seething about this now. He almost felt sorry for Daisy Furuncle; Hermione Granger would leave no stone unturned to find out who she was. "She has to be stopped."

He nodded in agreement and took a comforting sip of tea. "True. But if Sirius and Remus couldn't find out who she was from all of their spying and snooping this summer, what makes you think you can find out from the confines of Hogwarts?"

Hermione looked very smug. Her words, however, did not match her expression. "I don't know", she said, still oddly smug. "But I'll find a way." Harry drew his lips into a line, wondering how much tilting at windmills she would be doing.

"Um, you should know that after you left, Snape examined Parvati and he said she had concussion and had lost a lot of blood. She was unconscious."

This seemed to have no affect on her. Hermione sipped her tea; then, staring into the fire, said, "She probably reckoned she knew what was involved in being with him. She'd been with him before..."

He could tell that it pained her to say this; Harry knew that she tried very hard to forget Ron's relationship with Parvati. "But not when he was a werewolf", Harry pointed out. "She probably just thought — thought that she could help him —"

"Or thought that he wouldn't have the strength to resist her and then she could get back at me for that — that *name* thing!" Hermione spat.

Okay, Harry thought; I reckon she blames Parvati more than just a *little*. She sipped her tea some more and frowned into the fire; she seemed to be thinking very hard. "There's something wrong here, though. I just can't put my finger on it..." She drained her cup and continued to hold it before her, watching the flames, her eyes narrowed in thought. Harry also drained his cup and almost dropped it when she suddenly stood and said, "I've got it!"

She whirled on Harry. "That wasn't Parvati getting back at me for the name thing. It was *Padma*!"

Harry shook his head as though to clear his hearing. Had she said what he thought she had said? "Padma? How do you know?"

She paced as she spoke, restless, as she often was when working out a problem of some sort. "Last night, Parvati and Lavender and I all went up

to bed together. And Parvati was in her bed when I got up this morning. Not just under the covers, snoring; I could see her face and everything. When we found her — or her twin, rather — with Ron in the shack, I completely forgot. I wonder... at one time Ron seemed like he might be interested in either one of them, and then chose Parvati. You think Padma has been resentful about that all this time, and found a way to get to Ron without his being able to resist her? Is it possible she was doing this because of a rivalry with her own *twin*?"

Harry shrugged. "Dunno. Could be. Which means, if you think that was Padma, we should get up to the hospital wing and tell Madam Pomfrey. For the record, you know, in case there are any differences between them in their medical histories, even though they're identical twins."

"Right", she said.

She strode toward the door, her eyes clear now, although there were purple shadows under them. When she touched the door handle, Harry stopped her, looking into her face with concern. "Are you about to go off half-cocked?" he asked her, quite serious. She frowned at him.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Well — I suppose what I mean is, are you about to attack a girl — verbally or otherwise — who may be unconscious still because of the injuries she received from Ron? And are you telling me that you feel Ron is *completely* blameless? This isn't going to come back to haunt him the next time the two of you have a row? You're not going to bury your resentment and —"

"I get it, I get it, Harry." She turned and leaned heavily on the door, looking very tired. "Yes, I suppose I wish with a part of me that Ron had been stronger, that he'd been able to resist her, to fight his werewolf urges. Remus has learned to manage. On the other hand, Remus has had years and years to learn how; Ron was only bitten five months ago. *Five months!* Almost no time at all. How is he expected to cope with this sort of thing already? He's shown remarkable improvement in dealing with his strength; it's been weeks since I last saw him break a glass just by picking it up. I just —" She let out an uncontrolled sob, and covered her mouth with her hand; "I just wish he'd never been bitten", she said through her fingers. She tried to collect herself and took her hand down from her mouth, and now she was wringing her hands together. "And yes, I know that's not a useful thought to have, because he *was* bitten. And I can wish Rita Skeeter and

Peter Pettigrew dead all I want and nothing will change. The moon will rise full tonight and Ron will become a wolf, which will *hurt*, and he won't have any control over it the way we do when we transform into animals. And it will happen the following two nights, and every month for the rest of Ron's life. And there's nothing to be done for it except for him to drink the world's vilest potion and try to stay away from people before the full moon. And even when he tries to do that — some stupid girl who hasn't any idea what she's doing manages to sneak in to see him and risks her neck, which will wind up being blamed on *Ron*, judging from the article that *cow* wrote, and — and —"

She started crying again and Harry took her into his arms. She sobbed on his chest while he patted her on the back and shushed her lightly.

When she was done crying this time, she stepped away from him suddenly and opened the door, then strode outdoors and went to the large barrel Hagrid used to catch rainwater; she thrust both hands into the barrel and splashed some water on her face, then dried her skin with a handkerchief. She lifted her face to Harry, asking him, "How do I look?"

Her brown eyes were slightly bloodshot, rimmed with red and underscored by purple. Her nose was a deep rose color (it looked like she'd either been crying or trying to get drunk), her cheeks were sallow, her lips pale and chapped.

"Erm", he said uncertainly, "you look fine." Surely the truth wouldn't be helpful at this moment.

She nodded and turned briskly. "Are you coming?"

He walked alongside her. "Right. Hospital wing."

She nodded again and walked more quickly, swinging her arms purposefully. Harry kept up with her, although he felt like a world-weariness had seeped into his soul. One thing that he could be glad about was that Hermione didn't blame Ron; it would be difficult, but they *could* go on after this. She wasn't going to tell him to go to hell, as Ginny had done with *him*.

When they reached the hospital wing, Hermione put her hand on the door knob and hesitated just a moment before opening it. Then she took a deep breath, set her jaw and turned the knob. In the infirmary, they found Ron in a bed near the door and Padma in a bed on the opposite side of the room, closest to Madam Pomfrey's office; the matron was nowhere in sight. Harry and Hermione hurried to Ron's bedside; glancing over his

shoulder, Harry saw that Padma was unconscious, but her chest was rising and falling with a better rhythm than when he'd seen her in the Shrieking Shack.

Ron was sitting up in bed, bare-chested, with glistening liniment adorning various scratches he bore on his chest and arms. Frankly, Harry thought, it seemed that Padma had gotten a bit rough with Ron, as well. Ron swallowed as he looked at the two of them, then practically snarled, "What are you two doing here?"

Harry grimaced. *Don't tell me we're going through this all over again*, he thought, remembering the way Ron had immediately rejected Hermione after being bitten in the spring. "What do you think, you prat? We're only your best friends." He forced a smile, feeling that it was wiser to lump him and Hermione together at this point, rather than distinguishing her as Ron's girlfriend.

"You really want to be best friends with a monster who would do *that* to someone?" he said bitterly, nodding at Padma. "Or who — who would sleep with some other girl when he had the most wonderful — the best —" he choked out, looking at Hermione with tears in his eyes, making them appear very blue.

"What do you mean *had*?" she demanded suddenly. "I — I know it wasn't your fault, Ron", she said softly, her back turned to Padma as though she was determined to forget the other girl existed.

As though her sanity depended upon it, Harry thought.

Ron shook his head bleakly. "I should have gone to the dungeons; it would have been a lot harder for someone to get near me if I was properly locked up. She said she followed the two of you when you came to bring me lunch yesterday, so she knew how to get into the tunnel. Hid in the shrubbery and saw you hit the knot. She said she didn't know where the tunnel would take her and was really surprised when it turned out to be the rebuilt Shrieking Shack. There'd been a story put about that it was rebuilt so that the ghosts who lived there wouldn't try to find new homes in the village, as most people who have household ghosts are comfortable with them and don't want new ones, and folks who don't have `em don't want to start."

He looked past Harry and Hermione now, gazing at Padma. "She let herself in after dinner last night. By then I was going mad, and then — I smelled her. I *knew* it was her. And I felt like — like I was going to go

mad. She came into the room and I — I tried not to touch her. I really did. I begged her to stun me or something, leave me lying on the floor stupefied all night. It was all I could think of. But — but she just kept coming toward me —"

He looked at Hermione, pleading in his eyes. "I didn't want to, Hermione. I really didn't..."

"I believe you, Ron! Oh, I do!" She sat on the edge of the bed and put her hand on his cheek. She was crying and then Harry saw, to his shock, that Ron was also, quiet tears running down his cheeks. He put his hand over hers, holding it and kissing the palm briefly; he brought their joined hands down then and laid hers on her lap, looking very sad, as though he were relinquishing his right to it.

"Are you sure?" he said with a shake in his voice. "Because — if you didn't — it would be so much easier — easier to —" He couldn't continue.

"What?" she wanted to know.

He pointed at Padma's prostrate form. "Well, just look at her! Apparently when — when she was — I mean when — when I was —" he swallowed; "on top of her", he choked out, "I — I was pounding her head on the floor; I was holding her head in my hands and — and *pounding* it on the floorboards —" He covered his eyes with his hand, then whispered, "There's — there's a dent. In the floor. It's a wonder I didn't twist her head right off —"

Harry's stomach clenched, and he glanced at Padma, glad that she was alive, that Ron couldn't be charged with her murder. Ron was looking at her too, shaking his head. "I hurt her feelings so badly before, when we broke up, and now I've hurt her like this... She doesn't deserve it, even if she *did* sneak in to see me. No one deserves to be treated like that..."

He looked at Hermione pointedly, and Harry realized that he *was* pushing her away again, the stupid prat. But Hermione was focusing on something else.

"But that's not Parvati, Ron", she told him, her eyes clear, as though he hadn't just implied that he had no intention of ever sleeping with her, or even continuing to be her boyfriend.

Ron frowned. "What? Of course she is."

Hermione shook her head vigorously. "No; when I went to bed last night, Parvati was with me and Lavender. And this morning, when I got up

to go running, she was still asleep. That's Padma!" she exclaimed, pointing at the unconscious girl. "She wanted you to *think* she was Parvati."

Ron frowned. "But why? Why would she do that?" He squinted at the other girl. "Are you sure? I thought — I was so certain she was Parvati. She *smelled* like Parvati... I mean that in a good way..." he started to say, then stopped, clearly realizing that Hermione didn't want to hear about whether Ron liked the way Parvati smelled.

But suddenly, Harry wasn't so sure. He paced, as Hermione had, trying to work out what seemed so wrong to him...

"Wait!" he cried suddenly, making the other two goggle at him. "You were right, Ron! That *is* Parvati!"

Ron looked at him as though he were mad. "What? I thought Hermione just said Parvati was in the dorm all night —"

"— because Padma wanted Hermione to think *she* was Parvati. It wasn't *you* Padma was trying to fool, Ron." He turned to Hermione. "It was *you*!"

"Me? Whatever are you talking about, Harry?" Hermione looked utterly baffled, which wasn't an expression Harry could remember seeing on her face very often.

"When I was about to go into the tunnel with you and Snape this morning, Sandy said to me, 'The fish has come to the wolf'. See, when we were in fifth year and I took Sandy with me to Divination, she said to me at one point, 'A fish shall burn'. And that was the class when Parvati put her sleeve in the candle and her robes caught fire..."

"Yeah, and you drenched the rest of us putting it out", Ron added, reminding him of his mistake with the spells — a mistake he hadn't made since.

"So?" Hermione said, shrugging.

"So?" Harry echoed her. "Parvati is a Pisces; Sandy was referring to her by the symbol of her astrological sign. And then she did it again this morning; 'The fish has come to the wolf'. Parvati's the fish. Sandy does that a lot."

Hermione looked at the other girl. "But — but she and her sister are twins. Couldn't Sandy just as easily have been talking about Padma?"

Harry shook his head. "No. They don't even have the same birthday; they're each born on one side of midnight, on the cusp between Aquarius and Pisces. Padma is Aquarius, the water bearer. Parvati is the fish. *You're*

the one Padma was trying to fool, Hermione, not Ron. It must have been *Padma* who slept in your dormitory last night, so you wouldn't wonder where Parvati was and suspect — well, that she'd done what she'd done..."

Hermione looked at the girl with her mouth open. Harry's head felt like it was spinning. He could have sworn that he found Parvati with Ron that morning, then since he'd entered the infirmary, he'd been thinking that she was Padma; now he had to switch to thinking of her as Parvati again...

Ron grimaced. "It doesn't really matter, though, does it? So Padma helped her sister. Practically helped her into a grave is what she did. Parvati has never been anything but — but good and kind to me since we started seeing each other. Then I hurt her dreadfully and she broke up with me. And now I've almost killed her." Harry could see how it pained Hermione to hear him speak so kindly of Parvati; Harry wondered now whether Ron had had at least some feelings for her when they were still seeing each other; surely the time he'd seen them kissing madly in a classroom Ron hadn't been indifferent to her? And they'd been very close after surviving the collapse of the Three Broomsticks, sweetly protective of each other. He knew that Hermione had noticed this as well; he remembered her watching them at the site of the explosion. After she had flung herself at Ron. But it had been no good; there was no way Ron had been able to forget Hermione, to get her out of his mind, and with a single slip of the tongue, he and Parvati were history...

But it was clear now that Parvati had only done that because of her self-respect, her pride. She hadn't *really* wanted to give him up. And the previous evening, she'd tried to take him back.

Ron turned his head, not looking at either one of them. "I'm never going to risk that again. Never. I'm not safe."

Harry looked at Hermione and she frowned back at him. "Ron, just give it time —" he started to say. His friend turned furious eyes to him, a red glint dancing there.

"I'm not changing my mind. I'm a monster and should be treated that way, as dangerous. I let the two of you convince me before that I could live a normal life, that I could be like other people. You meant well, but it's just not possible." He put his hand over Hermione's and stroked it. "I wish it were, but it's just not." He looked Harry in the eye. "I'm sorry about the whole thing with Ginny, Harry. But — well, since you're unattached, and Hermione — well, maybe you two should try to make a go of it again."

Without having me to worry about. You don't need to sneak about or anything. You — you have my blessing —" he tried to say, but the final word half-died in his throat, and he had to look away from them.

"No."

Ron looked up at Hermione, who had stood and was glaring at him with her hands on her hips. "You did the same thing right after you were bitten. You will *not* make decisions like this when you are in such emotional turmoil. I am still your girlfriend, you are my boyfriend, and that's that. I won't hear such nonsense. You are *not* a monster and *she* brought this on herself. So just — so just *shut up!*" she cried, turning on her heel and storming out of the infirmary, making the glass in the door rattle when she slammed it behind her.

Ron stared at the door, then looked at Harry. "Did she — did she just *forbid* me to break up with her?"

"I think so", he said, still somewhat taken aback by Hermione's performance.

Ron shook his head. "She wants to think she's in charge, but this is beyond her control." He looked more serious than Harry had ever seen him. "Harry — I want you take good care of Hermione. When I'm gone." Harry opened his mouth to protest, but suddenly, Ron was going on, saying, "Do you know where Sirius lives? I mean — where his rooms are in the staff wing?"

Harry was thrown. "I've seen the rooms where my aunt and Mrs. Fi — I mean, Professor Figg live. Or at least, I've seen the sitting room they share. And Maggie's, of course, when we had tea there. Don't know about Sirius. He's away a lot, when he's not teaching, because of — you know." Harry wondered if Sirius was spying on Rodney Jeffries at that very moment.

Ron nodded. "Well, try to find out for me, yeah? There's — there's something of his I need to borrow, something I need you to get for me..."

Harry shrugged. "Just ask him yourself. What did you want *me* to do? Steal something from him? You think I would do that?"

Ron looked disgruntled. "Yes, I'm so certain he will give me his gun with the silver bullets if I just *ask*..."

Harry had been sitting in a chair next to Ron's bedside, but now he stood in shock. "No, Ron! I won't let you do it! That *isn't* the answer!"

"What is? Get you to do it, have you go to prison? Or Hermione? Yeah, I could really convince her to do that..." He shook his head, miserable. "It's the only thing to be done, Harry, the only way... Don't you think that'll be easier on my mum than if they put me on trial for doing *that* to Parvati? Remember Buckbeak's trial? Right mess, that was. Would you rather it happen when Macnair comes here after I've lost the trial? I want it to be on my own terms..." He started to cry quietly again, and Harry looked away from him and at Parvati — *Parvati*, not *Padma*, he had to remind himself.

When he turned back to Ron again, he'd wiped the tears away. "Parvati's not going to bring charges against you, Ron. And her parents can't, because she's of-age. It has to be her. Listen, Ron — do you think maybe — maybe you ought to take some time off and *talk* to someone about feeling this way? Maybe check into St. Mungo's?"

Ron snorted. "I don't know whether they just *let* you just check into hospital at St. Mungo's when you feel suicidal, Harry. And anyway, just because I'm feeling like killing myself doesn't mean it's not *justified*. I mean, honestly — if — I don't know — someone awful — if Lucius Malfoy, sitting in Azkaban, were feeling suicidal, would anyone care?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "He's been in Azkaban for about a year and a half. I reckon by now he *does* feel suicidal, thanks to the dementors. And no, I don't think anyone would care. Well, okay, maybe Draco Malfoy would care a little, and possibly his mum. And that cousin of his seems to like her uncle all right, even though he's a great bastard. So there you go; bad example. Even Lucius Malfoy has people who'd probably be upset if he snuffed himself out."

"I just meant — because of what I am. Wouldn't the world really be better off without me?"

"Are you implying that Remus Lupin should have offed himself years ago? For the good of mankind? And yes — I know that would have meant you not getting bitten. But it wasn't his fault. And he's worked very hard over the years to control himself. He's a *brilliant* wizard and teacher. If it weren't for him teaching me to conjure a Patronus, I might have been kissed by a dementor when I was thirteen. Hermione too, and Sirius and Snape... He saved us all, when you think about it, by teaching me that. It also came in handy during the third task of the tournament and when I was in my other life. I'll always be very grateful to Remus. And, you great git,

I doubt that you could have caught me the way you did at the match in Wales if you weren't so freakishly strong now. So basically I owe my life to two werewolves, and if you start talking about silver bullets again, you will be on the receiving end of a *very* nasty hex."

Harry had pulled out his wand and was brandishing it at Ron. Ron lay back in his bed, contemplating the ceiling. "All right, all right. No more talk about silver bullets..."

Harry put his wand away and sat again. "But I still think you should take some time off and talk to someone."

"At St. Mungo's? It's for magical maladies, Harry, remember? You were burnt by a magic ball of fire, that's why you were there. Neville's parents had Cruciatus on them for too long, that's why they're there. Malfoy put the Hara Kiri curse on Fleur, that's why she's there. I doubt that my suicidal depression falls under the heading of 'magical malady'."

"But it's *because* you're a werewolf. Surely being bitten by a werewolf and becoming one yourself is a magical malady? You need some help learning to cope with this, with what it means for the rest of your life. And not just by doing karate and meditation. *Really* cope."

Ron looked down and picked at some lint on his blanket. "I reckon", he said reluctantly.

"Let me and Hermione help you, Ron. That's what friends are for." He paused. "You know how Moody lost his leg?" he said suddenly. Ron shook his head. "In the Great War. He was in the Muggle army to keep an eye on his best mate, protect him. But in the end, he couldn't. And then, when his leg was wounded, he was still mourning his friend and just used pain-blocking charms so that the leg wouldn't hurt him so much; turns out that was the worst possible thing he could have done, as he would have known sooner that it was really bad if he could have felt the pain, and he probably wouldn't have gotten gangrene. They had to amputate it in a field hospital. Young Muggle doctor with a saw. No anesthetic." Ron shuddered and swallowed. "But when he told me about this, you know what, Ron? Never once did he blame his mate for his losing that leg. Not once."

Ron shrugged. "Well, I suppose you don't speak ill of the dead. I get your point. But another thing is — I don't know about going to St. Mungo's because, well, I don't know who'd pay for it. I don't even know if I'm going to see any money for the match I was in, since I was basically an illegal player."

Madam Pomfrey had bustled into the room, and after starting to fluff Parvati's pillow, walked briskly over to Ron's bed, straightening his blanket compulsively. "What's this I hear about St. Mungo's?" she said with an eyebrow raised.

"Well", Harry said, "I'm not even sure if it's a service that's available — can someone who's rather depressed check himself into St. Mungo's for treatment? Do they do that sort of thing? And would the treatment consist of actually trying to help the person with their problems, instead of just putting a cheering charm on them?"

Madam Pomfrey stopped messing about with the blankets and looked at Ron as though she'd never seen him before. "This is about you, then?"

He nodded. "I was considering eating some of the silver spoons down in the Great Hall for lunch, but Harry talked me out of it. Still — I reckon he's right that I need to talk to someone." Harry heard that Ron was trying to force some levity into his voice — but it was very forced.

She nodded, looking sympathetic. "They do that, and not just using charms. Not many witches and wizards take advantage of it, mind you, and more probably should, but they do it. And you don't have to worry about paying; it can go on the school bill. We have an agreement with St. Mungo's; any time we can't handle a student's treatment here, we can transfer them to their facilities." She looked grim for a moment. "You're probably doing the right thing, to get help coping. I'm ashamed to say that when Remus Lupin was in school, I was one of the few people who knew about him, and I wasn't always very helpful — or sympathetic. And now that that article has come out — well, I understand what he was going through every month. Always in here looking for a sleeping draught, kept saying he had nightmares. Wouldn't tell me why." She pointed her finger at Ron. "Yes, I know you're embarrassed. But that woman's article was a blessing. Now that it's out, the medical community knows about a problem to be solved, and can set about trying to do just that."

Ron grimaced. "Maybe. But if it weren't for that article, Parvati wouldn't be lying there like that..."

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips together. "She was a stupid, silly girl who is very lucky to be alive. You didn't ask her to meet you, did you?" When he shook his head, she sniffed and said, "I thought not. You were trying to be responsible. She wasn't. That's all there is to it. Now, then;

when shall I tell the hospital ambulance to come for you? Are you still interested?"

Ron looked a little panicked now, and Madam Pomfrey added, "If you check yourself in, you can check yourself out at any time. You're of-age."

He looked a trifle calmed by that, but now Harry said, "It probably shouldn't be until after the full moon —"

"No, Harry", Ron interrupted. "I've been taking my potion." He looked at Madam Pomfrey. "I'd like to go as soon as possible. I can just spend the night as a wolf at St. Mungo's instead of here. I'll be a tame wolf, because of the potion. I won't be a bother for the staff." Madam Pomfrey nodded and returned to her office, presumably to use the fireplace to call for the ambulance.

Harry frowned. "But we won't be able to be with you", he complained.

Ron grimaced. "Not this time, I think, Harry. You know? It's rather too soon", he added, nodding at Parvati's bed again. Harry could tell that he meant it was too soon for Ron to be so close to Hermione, all night long. He was trying to push her away, after all.

Harry nodded. "All right, then. Hermione and I will make sure you can keep up with your classes, though. How long do you reckon you'll be away?"

He shrugged. "Dunno. I suppose that's a bit unpredictable in my case, isn't it?"

"Well, don't take too long. You need to practice for the broom race, remember. And our first match is in November."

"Captain the team for me until I get back, all right, Harry? I reckon if I think of having a schedule, that might help me. Must get out by the time of the first Quidditch match, if not sooner..."

"And Hermione will make sure we're ready to take our Apparition tests, so we'll be ready for the broom —" He stopped abruptly, reddening, remembering again that Ron couldn't ever Apparate.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Will you cut that out, Harry! Stop thinking you can't use the word 'Apparate' around me! I've accepted it, all right?" He grinned at Harry. "If you two aren't there to see me begin and end the race, I'll have to curse you."

Harry grinned back. "Get well soon", he said quietly, putting out his hand; Ron grasped it strongly, then pulled Harry to him in a rough hug, pounding his shoulder painfully.

He released Harry and said, "I did mean one thing — take care of her, Harry."

Harry nodded. "Of course. We'll miss you. Both of us."

Ron looked grim. "I just hope they know what they're doing."

As he left the hospital wing, Harry thought, *So do I, Ron. So do I.*

* * *

Harry and Hermione were the last to leave the table after the Halloween feast. It had been a splendid feast, as they all were, but they'd missed Ron dreadfully. He always loved the Halloween feasts, and Harry couldn't believe he was missing his last one. Ron had been writing to each of them while in hospital, and when Harry had caught Hermione sniffing over her most recent letter that afternoon, she'd handed it to him to read.

Dear Hermione,

Not doing too badly today. Talked for a long time to Dr. Bastion yesterday. He doesn't want me to make any rash decisions about you. But I think a rash decision would be to think that I can be with you in any real way any time soon. When you were with Harry and I didn't know it yet, he told me once that you wouldn't wait forever for me. You might have to, I'm afraid. Which means you probably shouldn't. I don't want you to put your life on hold for me. I'd hate to think you were living like a nun because of me, keeping yourself from being happy with someone else. I love you too much to let you do that...

He'd put the letter down and let her cry on him some more for a while, before they went down to the feast. And then they'd been reluctant to return to the common room, to leave the most public place in the school, where they had to pretend that all was well with the world and that the Head Boy and Head Girl were having a perfectly splendid seventh year and weren't missing their best friend dreadfully.

When they gave the password to the Fat Lady and reentered the common room, very few people were left in it. Harry looked at Hermione's forlorn face and kissed her gently on the cheek. "G'night. Get some rest. Do you want me to write to Ron about —?"

She shook her head. "No. Not you. Maybe his doctor can talk some sense into him."

Harry suddenly noticed Ginny on the other side of the room, on the window seat next to Neville; they were both reading, sitting side by side companionably. He swallowed, watching her, and said, not looking at Hermione, "All right, then. I'll be going up to bed." He hoped Ginny would look up and notice him, but she did not; he watched her turn a page, her brow furrowed in concentration, and he tried not to think how he'd like to kiss her right there, on the furrow, to smooth it out...

Shaking himself, he tried to smile at Hermione again before he went up the stairs. After he'd changed into his pajama trousers and had climbed into bed with Sandy wrapped around his upper arm, he lay with his hands behind his head, staring up at the canopy of his four-poster and listening to Seamus and Dean breathing, Seamus' breaths starting to sound more like snores. At length, Neville came up to bed too, and Harry hated the spring in his step, even though it was late. Neville hummed lightly to himself as he changed into his pajamas, and Harry fought the urge to hex him. *But it's not his fault*, Harry reminded himself. *If Ginny really does like him, he has a perfect right to be happy about it...*

Neville finally climbed into his bed and put out his candle, and the dorm was enveloped in blackness. At long last, Harry found himself drifting off to sleep, but unfortunately, his dreams turned into memories of being with Ginny in the common room, except that this time, he could see her, see her body as she removed her dressing gown and nightdress... He jerked himself awake forcibly. *That's not terribly useful, is it?* he scolded himself. He stared up into the inky blackness again, drumming his fingers on his stomach, but now he was feeling too awake to just drop off again. And even if he did, he feared more dreams about Ginny, whether from this life or his other life...

He'd been unable to get over her, no matter how he tried. And it wasn't even as though she was being rude to him; on the contrary, she simply behaved toward him now as though what he did was of no consequence to her whatsoever. It didn't help that he'd seen Neville, several nights before, kiss her goodnight. He could tell it was supposed to be on the cheek, but Ginny had suddenly turned her head and their lips had met briefly. Neville had pulled back in surprise, looking around the common room self-consciously, his face very red. Harry had met Ginny's eye, and saw that she

looked a little panicked at first, for some reason, then triumphant. It was damn odd, Harry thought. But somehow, every time he saw her with Neville, it was harder and harder to get her out of his mind.

And for some reason, she was far more demonstrative with Neville in the Great Hall than she was in the common room. She encouraged Neville to sit with his arm across her shoulders when they were relaxing and talking to Seamus, Dean and her dormmates after finishing dinner. Dean was now seeing Zoey Russell, and from what he could gather, Seamus was interested in Zoey putting in a good word for him with Annika Olafsdottir.

Harry had glanced across the hall and seen that Draco Malfoy was undergoing a slow burn at these times, glaring at Neville Longbottom so intently it was surprising that his head didn't spontaneously explode. Harry also noticed that Mariah would roll her eyes and tap her fork on her plate impatiently, watching him watch Neville and Ginny.

Harry decided that he wasn't destined to sleep this evening. He climbed out of bed and wrapped his dressing gown around himself and slid into his running shoes. He crept down the stairs to the common room, finding it bleak and deserted. After lighting a fire, he carried the books he'd left on a table by the window to the small circle of light and started going over his Apparition notes, practically tingling with anticipation, dying for the day he had his license.

After a time, though, he felt he had stared at the notes long enough. He set his books aside and sat with his arms around his legs, gazing at the flames. "Sandy, will I ever get over her?" he asked, not really expecting an answer. He didn't even know whether she was awake; it turned out that she was, but she didn't answer his question.

"The she-wolf shall approach."

Oh, he thought. Hmm. Not an answer to his question exactly... Perhaps he should go back up to his dorm before Hermione came downstairs. He was fairly certain that was who Sandy meant, and she hadn't predicted that they'd be in the same room together, just that Hermione was approaching. She'd called Hermione a she-wolf several times since she'd become an Animagus.

Hermione was sleeping in the sixth-year dorm since the morning they had found Parvati with Ron. She had accused Padma of conspiring to help her sister sleep with Ron, and learned that Padma had been ignorant of Parvati's plans. Evidently, it was all Lavender's idea. She had put the plan

into Parvati's head, including getting Padma to come spend the night in the Gryffindor dorm, where Hermione would naturally assume she was Parvati. Padma thought it was about a boy, but she claimed that she hadn't known it was about *Ron*.

Hermione was no longer on speaking terms with Lavender, and she was barely civil to Parvati and Padma (since, when she encountered them together she was never completely clear on their identities and it was more efficient to snub them both). She asked the sixth-year girls whether any one of them would mind switching with her, and Annika volunteered. Hermione reminded Harry of the fact that Annika had once been interested in Ron, and Harry wondered whether it could just have easily been Annika who'd decided to spend a night with him in the sleeping shack. Perhaps Annika identified with Parvati.

Harry supposed it was a better solution than Hermione's first instinct: to toss both Parvati and Lavender out of the dorm and make them beg for others to take them in. She may have been Head Girl, but Harry didn't think she technically had the authority to do that, just because she wasn't getting along with her dormmates. The switching had worked fine, so far, and McGonagall wasn't even aware of it, as far as he knew. Hermione and Ginny still got on well, and Ginny shared her letters from Ron with Hermione, which Hermione reported to Harry were more cheerful than the ones to *her*, his girlfriend.

But even though he'd had ample warning, he somehow couldn't bring himself to flee just because Hermione was up and about. When she entered the common room, she looked surprised to see him, and hesitated on the threshold. He thought she looked like she'd been crying again. He wondered whether she'd had The Dream once more. Something she hadn't told Ron since the night he was bitten was that she had recurring nightmares about it. Harry had only found out since Ron had checked into St. Mungo's. It wasn't actually one dream, but a number of variations. Sometimes she was the one bitten, instead of Ron; sometimes Ron was completely devoured by the wolf, instead of just bitten; sometimes after devouring Ron, the wolf came after her, too; but in every version, she felt at first that since she knew about the wolf coming after Ron, there might be a chance she could stop it. But in each version, she never managed to do it, and the jaws closed over his flesh again and again...

She still hesitated. He thought she looked like she needed some comforting, so he patted the rug beside him. "Come here", he said softly. She still wavered, then finally moved across the room and sat down close against him. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, kissing her on the top of the head. "Just close your eyes and rest. Don't think, for once", he whispered. She nodded and snuggled closer to him.

They sat together silently for a few minutes, enjoying the closeness, when suddenly, Hermione said, with a bitter edge to her voice, "I'm going to be alone all my life, aren't I? Ron's never going to change his mind."

He looked down at her. "Don't be stupid, Hermione." She bristled; he knew that if there was one thing that would get her attention it would be the word *stupid*.

"You know I'll always be there for you, don't you?"

She looked at him; her eyes were very bright but there was a rueful expression lurking there. "It's not the same."

He put his hand on her cheek affectionately. "He'll come round. He'd never dream of hurting you. Eventually you'll be together, I firmly believe that." He pulled her head down onto him once more and closed his eyes. "You make a lovely teddy bear, you know. I'll tell Ron, and then he won't be able to resist your charms..." he said sleepily, his eyes still closed.

She laughed briefly. "Oh, Harry, I never know when you're being serious."

"I'm being completely serious", he mumbled, finally feeling relaxed enough again that he started to drift off...

He was flying, flying, flying. He moved his wings back and forth, back and forth. The wind rustled his black hair. He looked side to side; his wings weren't moving him through the air, his arms were. He wasn't in his griffin form, he was just flying in his human body.

I must be dreaming, he thought.

He landed lightly on the observation deck of the Astronomy Tower. Ginny was waiting for him there, as she was in many of his dreams.

When he alit she stepped toward him and slid her arms up around his neck. Harry didn't remember when their lips made contact, because soon it seemed as if they had always been that way. His arms held her to him tightly, and then he finally moved his mouth down her

throat, opening her dressing gown... For some reason, in this dream, she was wearing her night clothes, but sometimes his dreams and elements from them overlapped with each other...

Lips on his jaw startled him. *This is a very real dream.* The lips moved down to his neck; teeth nipped him, a sucking suction against his throat suddenly sent fiery fingers throughout his limbs, responding to this not-unwelcome, gentle assault. He opened his eyes and realized that he was no longer dreaming. And that it wasn't Ginny kissing him.

It was Hermione.

But this realization came just as she covered his mouth with her own again, flicking her tongue out. He wanted to stop her, but somehow he was holding her head in place with his hands, and she wouldn't have been able to pull away if she'd wanted to. Which she clearly didn't. While they kissed he heard rustling and then she took one of his hands from her face and placed it on her chest; she had taken off her dressing gown and was wearing only her thin nightdress. He moaned into her mouth, starting to move his hand over the soft flesh that was only separated from him by a very thin layer of fabric, making her moan softly back at him. He pulled back from her, then ran his mouth down her throat, reaching for her other breast now. *She knows my weaknesses*, he thought as she became louder in her encouragement and reached for his right hand, directing it under the fabric that pooled around her hips. He started to slide it up her soft thigh. *And I know her weaknesses, too...*

But when he thought this, he stopped suddenly. He pulled back, his hands clasped together convulsively, and stared at her in horror.

Weaknesses.

That's all this is, he thought. They were being weak. He stared at her, the flushed cheeks, her chest heaving. Then he could see the epiphany come over her as well, the widened eyes, and she hastily pulled her dressing gown around her again, shivering as though she was cold, despite the fact that Harry could still feel the heat emanating from her.

"I — I should go — um — up to my —" he stuttered.

"Yes, yes", she agreed in a very high voice. "Definitely time to go —"

Each of them practically ran to their respective stairs, and Harry didn't breathe easy until he was lying in his four-poster again.

It's just too easy, he thought, for us to slip into our old ways...

He had to find some way to bring Ron to his senses, or hope the doctor could do it. But he knew he was mortified by what he'd done to Parvati, and Harry suspected that Hermione was just a little frightened herself.

In the morning, Hermione didn't speak to him when they went running with Ruth and Tony and Ginny. Even Ginny spoke to him, although it was in an odd and distant way, as though they'd only recently met and she didn't know him very well. At breakfast, Hermione ate silently, looking down at her plate. When she was done her food there were still fifteen minutes to go before the bell would ring for their first class. Harry stood up and grabbed her arm roughly.

"We have to talk", he said in a hard voice. He knew he needed to do this before he lost his nerve. She stumbled as she stood, but she had no choice as he was dragging her to the anteroom near the staff table. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Snape raise a quizzical eyebrow, and then Harry realized that the entire silent Great Hall must be watching the Head Boy dragging the Head Girl into the anteroom; the Head Boy and Head Girl who used to be a couple...

It was too late to worry about that now. He opened the door and pulled her into the room, slamming the door behind him. He put a locking charm on it, remembering Snape entering the room unexpectedly the time they were discussing Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner.

"Harry! What are you thinking? The entire school was watching!" she finally said. "Are you ma —?"

But he didn't give her the chance to finish; he pulled her to him and took her mouth suddenly in a kiss that, within moments, had her shivering from head to foot and clutching at him for dear life. But he didn't stop; he deepened it and continued, and when he finally, gently pulled back he could swear her temperature had gone up several degrees. Her eyes were frightened, but she also looked like she was surrendering.

"Is that what you want, Hermione?" he whispered fiercely. "Because it would be so easy to go back, wouldn't it? Back to fifth year. No one would question it; Ron already gave us his blessing, didn't he?"

She stared at him, mouth working, but no words coming out. "You — you don't *mean* that, do you Harry?" she asked finally, sounding more frightened than he expected. "I mean, Ron wouldn't have said that if he knew about —"

But she suddenly stopped herself, and Harry narrowed his eyes. "If Ron knew about *what*?"

"Never mind", she said quickly in a strange, high voice. Harry still thought there was something he was in the dark about, as well as Ron, but she didn't look like she was in a telling mood. He wished Ron was there, so he'd know whether she was lying...

"Tell me, Hermione, what was going through your head when we were kissing just now? It went on long enough; don't tell me your mind didn't wander just a *little*." She bit her lip and looked down. Harry didn't wait for her answer. "You were thinking about Ron, weren't you?"

She nodded guiltily. But Harry had received the expected answer, so he went on. "Well, I have to admit that I was thinking about Ginny. Is that what we want to do? Go through the motions, each of us knowing that when we're together you're thinking of Ron and I'm thinking of Ginny? Because frankly, that sounds pretty pathetic to me."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm sorry about last night, Harry, I truly am. I wasn't thinking! I mean — apart from Ron, there's Ginny! If she ever found out about last night, she'd think I was as bad as Mariah..." Hermione looked truly worried about this, and Harry was momentarily confused.

"But Ginny told me to go to hell. Why should she care what you do, except as far as it concerns her brother? Who, remember, told you to get back together with me?"

She was still biting her lip. "Ginny's my friend. I care what she thinks of me, Harry. And I'm just — I can't believe, even sleep deprived, that I did that..."

She was reddening and holding her crossed arms against her chest, her lips drawn into a stern line. Harry nodded.

"Right. So. Our response to Ron is — well, I was going to say 'Are you barmy?' but he's already in St. Mungo's... Our response is that *we are friends*. Nothing more. Not any more, at any rate. I mean — for two people to be together who are constantly thinking of other people isn't a very good idea, right?"

Hermione nodded. "Right", she said quietly, not looking at him. Then she raised her eyes suddenly. "You won't — you won't tell either Ginny or Ron about last night or this morning, will you? Ever?"

He was confused again; why was she talking about Ginny as though she was his girlfriend or something? Or even someone who cared whether he lived or died?

"Of course not. Why should I? In fact, we won't ever speak of it to each other again, either. Agreed?"

She agreed, and when they left, they discovered that the Great Hall was already empty of students; they hadn't had to worry about the bell because they didn't have a class first thing Friday mornings. They went to the library together, quietly working on opposite sides of the same table, and when the bell rang for the second morning class, they left for History of Magic, two friends walking side by side, and no sign that they'd ever been anything more.

* * *

Harry stepped out of the fireplace in the entrance to St. Mungo's and shook the soot out of his hair and robes. Hermione and Gabrielle Delacour had gone before him, and he moved swiftly out of the way so that Remus Lupin, who'd come with them, could emerge from the fireplace next. It was a matter of moments before Remus appeared, and as soon as he was out, he started sneezing.

"Damn soot. It's convenient to travel by Floo, sure, but no one seems to be capable of finding a way of getting rid of the dust", the werewolf complained, waving his wand over his patched robes, which, despite their age, were at least usually immaculate. He did the same for Harry, Hermione and Gabrielle. Bringing Gabrielle along was Hermione's idea; she'd talked to Professor McGonagall about the fact that Gabrielle hadn't had an opportunity to visit her sister in hospital once since the term had begun. McGonagall had contacted the girl's mother, who had allowed it. Her large blue eyes roamed around the enormous entry hall now, taking in its gargantuan proportions, as though wondering whether the doctors were all giants.

They approached the security desk, which was being manned by a different wizard than the one Harry had met when he'd come with Hermione to visit the Hogwarts students who'd been wounded in the Diagon Alley attack. They approached one by one.

"Name", the wizard said to Hermione in a monotone. When she responded, he said, "Wand, please", holding out his hand to her. She nervously removed her wand from her robes and handed it over. Rather

than testing it to find out about the last spell it had cast, as Harry had expected, the wizard confiscated it. Seeing Hermione's open mouth, he said, "Increased security measures. You'll get it back when you depart. You won't need it while you're here."

She closed her mouth again and moved out of the way so Gabrielle could give her name and hand over her wand. Harry did the same; this wizard revealed no reaction to his name, but merely looked for it on his list and took Harry's wand in a very stiff, businesslike fashion.

When Remus Lupin stepped up and gave his name, it was quickly found on the list and he quietly handed over his wand. This time, however, the wizard held onto it briefly, so that both he and Remus were touching it simultaneously. "You're the werewolf, aren't you?" he asked suddenly, his monotone finally varying — but only slightly.

Remus looked him in the eye, nodding, no expression on his face. The wizard didn't say anything else, but put Remus' wand with the others and waved them through; but when Harry looked over his shoulder at the wizard, he saw him watching Remus Lupin's back intently.

They went to the matron's office on the ground floor to ask where to go to see Ron Weasley and Fleur Delacour. The matron raised one eyebrow at them, but if it was because of Ron's name or Fleur's — or both — Harry couldn't tell.

"They're both on this level. Don't want to have patients of *that sort* too high up, you know", she said with a smirk, as though being suicidal or mad were *funny*, Harry thought. Their footsteps echoed in the vast, high corridors with their intersecting Gothic arches and high clerestory windows. Ribbed vaults of monotonous grey stone swept up overhead; at Hogwarts, there were wings where Hogwarts castle seemed almost Moorish, with different colors of stone — sand, crimson, lapis — alternated with each other, producing almost as great a rainbow effect as the stained glass windows. Even wings that were built in eras when grey stone was also the rule had color in the form of tapestries and banners, or large paintings. It seemed that all such variation in color was against the rules here, and the oversized proportions also made Harry feel very small and insignificant.

They turned and entered a corridor with a much lower coffered ceiling, and the matron herself led them to Ron's room. Harry and Hermione hesitated. Remus Lupin put his hand on Gabrielle's arm; she was already

only a few inches shorter than him, even though she'd just turned twelve the week before. It was still strange for Harry to have to look *down* to look at Remus, but he wasn't a very tall man. *Just tall enough*, he'd said to Harry once.

Remus looked grimly at Harry and Hermione. "We'll go to see Fleur now", he said quietly. The matron led them on to Fleur's room. Harry glanced at Hermione and nodded. They should be happier; Ron was checking out today. He was coming back to Hogwarts. Then why did they both feel so apprehensive?

Harry took a deep breath and knocked on the door, which had no window. He heard Ron's voice, neither cheerful nor depressed, call out, "Come in."

Harry opened the door and found Ron folding his clothes on the bed before placing them in a canvas bag. The room was as austere as a monk's cell, with a high, narrow metal bed, whitewashed walls with no artwork, and simple, unadorned furniture. There weren't even any curtains on the clear leaded windows — although there *were* bars on them. On the inside. Harry remembered the opulence of the Minister's room, where he'd been, and wished he'd been in a room like this instead. Unless this was only for — he didn't want to even *think* the term 'mental patients'. But that's precisely what Ron *was*, and it was Harry who'd suggested he check himself into St. Mungo's.

Ron was moving back and forth methodically between a large plain wardrobe and the bed as though he was an automaton. As he moved, he spoke tonelessly to them. "Came to see me back? Thanks. Are you all alone?"

"No", Harry said, his throat very dry. "Remus came with us, although he's accompanying Gabrielle Delacour to Fleur's room right now, to visit her. Fleur isn't going, of course. Gabrielle hasn't seen her sister since the term began."

Ron nodded. "We eat our meals in a room down the corridor, next to the common room. We have a common room too", he said, giving a small smile. "Not as nice as the Gryffindor common room, of course. And then there are the *smells* around here. When I've been allowed out on the grounds for walks, I've been going without a cloak, and the matron scolded me for it. I explained that I was trying to catch a headcold so I couldn't smell properly while I was here."

Hermione smiled feebly, as did Harry; he wasn't sure whether he was trying to be funny and they were expected to laugh. This was a Ron Harry hadn't met before, a Ron with an oddly flat affect. Harry wasn't sure what to think.

Ron was almost done packing. "I ate meals with Fleur a few times. All of the tables in the dining hall seat two people only. At least in our wing; it might be different elsewhere. It was nice to eat with her, actually. Unlike most people, she doesn't ask me anything about what it's like to be a werewolf. Doesn't talk much at all, in fact. And as smells go, the smell of a pregnant woman isn't too bad. It's like — a baby. And like warm milk. Not curdled; just — warm. Which is to be expected, I suppose. Anyway, I think she said one thing the entire time we ate. She asked me to pass the salt. I'm assuming, anyway. She only spoke French, but she pointed at the salt, so I knew what she wanted. That was it."

He closed his bag and hoisted it onto his shoulder. He'd shaved — or someone else had shaven him — and for the first time in a long while, Harry could see the scar on his cheek that was the legacy of the Three Broomsticks attack. Harry wondered why he'd gotten rid of the beard.

Somehow, though, asking questions like this of Ron right now didn't feel right to Harry; he still wasn't sure *who* this Ron Weasley was, and even a simple question like 'Why did you shave your beard?' seemed too personal a thing to ask a near-stranger.

They left the room and were surprised to find Remus Lupin and Gabrielle Delacour standing in the corridor, a few doors away, looking like they'd been waiting to talk to the three of them.

"What's wrong?" Hermione said immediately.

Gabrielle shook her head. "Nuzzing is wrong. My seestaire weeshes to see `Arry."

Harry frowned. "Me? Out of the blue she asked to see *me*?"

Gabrielle shook her head again, her long silky hair floating lightly around her face. "No, I told 'air zat you `ad come wiz me. She weeshes to see you", she repeated, and Harry looked uncertainly at Hermione and Ron. Hermione gestured toward Gabrielle with her head.

"Go on, then. We can wait."

Harry turned back toward the tall young girl uncertainly. He was surprised to see Gabrielle give him a small smile; she hadn't shown much friendliness to him during the term so far.

"Fleur reminded me zat you helped save me when she could not get to me in ze lake, when I was `air `ostage. I am sorry I `ave not been more —" She seemed to flounder, looking for the right English word.

"That's all right", Harry said hurriedly, wondering at Fleur mentioning this, of all things. "You've had a lot on your mind, I imagine. New school and all that."

She gave him another small smile, and Harry looked at Remus Lupin, who tried to reassure him. "She is quite well — physically. About seven months along. The matron says the baby is doing fine, too."

"But", Harry said, "how will she give birth? Will she know what's happening to her? Won't she be frightened, wondering why she's in pain?"

Remus shook his head. "She knows she's pregnant. She even knows that Draco only made her *think* she was — hurting the baby. She's just still finding it comforting to retreat into herself a bit. She's been severely traumatized. But the matron reckons that she'll be able to have a normal birth, and when she does, there's a chance that once she has real proof that the baby is all right, she'll have a complete recovery and be able to leave."

"And — and she wants to see *me*", Harry said, still incredulous. Remus stood back and gestured toward the open doorway, as if to usher Harry in. He took a deep breath and walked into Fleur Delacour's room. He was immediately struck by a wave of — he wasn't sure what. It didn't feel entirely different than when he'd been assaulted by the very strong feeling at the World Cup that he had to dive onto the field — and yet it *was* different. He didn't feel like he needed to brag to her, to do something splendid to make her run off with him. What he felt like was — he felt like *protecting* her. He suddenly felt an overwhelmingly strong urge to keep her and her child safe. It wasn't an altogether bad way to feel — at least he didn't have the urge to claim that he'd invented Floo powder or the Wizarding Wireless — but he tried to shake it, nonetheless, as it made him feel like his thinking was a bit fuzzy.

To try to clear his head, he looked away from her thin form with the oddly distended belly, and gazed at the room. It seemed that, originally, the room could have been a mirror image of Ron's. The austerity had been offset here, though, by the addition of some wizarding photographs on the wall with smiling, waving Delacours, and other cozy touches, like a few small braided rugs on the tile floor and a quilt on the bed, instead of the plain white sheets and blankets which were all that Ron had. A rocking

chair near the window was piled with pillows and topped with another quilt, and a basket stood nearby with what looked like books with pictures of gardens. Fleur also had some flowers growing in a series of pots on a plant stand on the other side of the window, and she was watering these flowers when Harry entered, using a long-spouted copper watering can; the spout ended in a disk with a multitude of tiny holes puncturing it, so that she was able to give the plants something approximating a gentle rain.

She looked very serene, tending to her flowers, brushing her cornsilk hair behind one small, perfect ear, and Harry, still trying to get his bearings, was startled when she looked up at him suddenly. She put down the watering can on the windowsill and walked to him; he was taller than her now, which was strange to him. He remembered feeling very small when he'd entered the room next to the Great Hall and found Fleur, Cedric and Viktor waiting before the hearth, the three champions of Beauxbatons, Hogwarts and Durmstrang having to accept an interloper, all because of Barty Crouch, Jr. Fleur had called him a "leettle boy." She looked up at him; he was a "leettle boy" no longer.

"Arry", she said simply, putting her hands on his arms. She raised her chin and kissed him lightly, once on each cheek, then surveyed him again. He felt positively light-headed as the protective instinct washed over him again, due to her proximity. She waved her arm toward the rocking chair, suggesting he sit there, but he shook his head. "You take it. I'm fine standing." He reckoned that it was a natural and good thing, for women who were all or part veela to induce men around them to want to protect them when they were pregnant. But it was still a bit disorienting to Harry.

Now she shook *her* head and walked around him, looking grim, touching his shoulders lightly, then pulling her hand back. Suddenly, she had a very determined look on her face and started unbuttoning his shirt, tearing desperately at the buttons. *What the hell is she doing?* he thought. He grabbed her wrists, then shook his head sternly at her. "No", he said, shaking his head slowly, as though she were deaf. *What's gotten into her?*

But she backed up from him and he let go of her. Then she reached over her shoulder with one hand, the opposite shoulder with the other, and Harry finally understood. "Oh", he said in understanding now. "You want to see my back. It's okay. I'm fine."

She shook her head, pointing at herself and frowning, looking like she was going to cry. Then suddenly, she started slapping her left hand with

her right, her face crumpled up like a child being scolded. Harry stepped forward and grabbed her wrists again. "No, Fleur, don't. You can see my back, if you like. So you can see that I'm all right."

She nodded, and he unbuttoned his own shirt after taking off his cloak and robes. When he slid the shirt from his arms, standing with nothing on from the waist up, he felt strange and cold; he turned around to show Fleur his back, and she stepped forward tentatively, putting her hands on the skin, pressing her palms flat, running them down from his shoulders to the small of his back, making him shiver; a woman had not touched him like that for a long time, it seemed, and he was already having trouble keeping his thoughts straight. She was saying something soft and sibilant under her breath, something that sounded like *triste*, repeated over and over.

He turned around to face her, and suddenly, he felt compelled to tell someone. She seemed unlikely to tell another person, so there didn't seem to be any harm in it. "Do you want to know a secret?" She looked up at him with tears hanging in her enormous blue eyes. "Rodney Jeffries healed me. It's the truth. He let himself into St. Mungo's and healed me."

She didn't respond verbally; she reached for his right hand and, taking it in hers, placed it very deliberately on the upper curve of her belly, holding it there, then looking at the wall as though it fascinated her. Harry stood there, shirtless, his hand under hers on her stomach. Suddenly he felt movement; a distinct sort of jolt, then the feeling of something actually *pushing* against his hand, as though trying to break through her stomach. She raised a teary but smiling face to him and continued to hold his hand in place so he could feel the baby's acrobatics.

"*Bebe*," she said softly. "*Bebe*."

He wasn't certain how long they stood there; Harry felt a strange series of emotions running through him as he felt Fleur's baby move beneath his hand. He felt glad that she was aware of the baby, and sorrowful that the Ginny in his other life hadn't been carrying his child, and that he would never know what it was like, now, to stand with her, like this, his hand on her belly, and feel his child — *their* child — move beneath his hand... He felt sad and protective and more than a little self-conscious, as he still did not have his shirt on.

Finally, mustering as much will-power as he could, he pulled his hand back and swallowed. He turned to pick his shirt up from the bed and buttoned it silently, adding his robes and cloak when he was done. He

turned back to Fleur; she had seated herself in the rocker, her hands covering her own belly protectively now, rocking back and forth idly and staring through the barred window at the scudding clouds in the late autumn sky. Harry wondered now whether *all* women (or all witches) emitted something that made the men around them instinctively want to protect them when they were expecting babies. But then he thought about his mother, pregnant with his sister when she had died, and decided that perhaps that wasn't how it worked. It must be a veela thing.

He walked to her and bent over, placing a gentle kiss on her brow. She looked up at him and grasped his hand, placing it on her belly once more; he felt the life move within her and smiled down at her.

"Goodbye, Fleur", he said softly. "I mean — *bonne soir*", he added uncertainly. She smiled at him.

"*Au revoir*," she corrected him. He straightened up and removed his hand.

"*Au revoir*."

He turned to go, and when he was walking back to the hospital entrance hall with the others, he declined to say anything about what had occurred in the room, saying only that it was between him and Fleur.

* * *

This time, on the day of the Wales vs. France game, all of the Hogwarts students with permission to attend were sitting on the Welsh side and cheering for him. He looked with trepidation at the French Seeker, surprised to find that it was Jean-Claude Jones, who had tried out for the Welsh team. Evidently, the French team had found themselves in need of a new Seeker, and since Jones qualified for either team, he had tried out and landed the position.

Unfortunately, Harry reckoned without the kind of fierce pride Jones brought to the game, as he seemed to be trying to make up for the perceived loss of face that had occurred when Harry had beaten him to become the Welsh Seeker. The French Beaters, in particular, were merciless when it came to hitting the Bludgers his way, and barely ever let the Welsh Beaters near them, which meant that Harry was dodging heavy metal balls when Jones spotted the Snitch and subsequently caught it, winning the game for France.

Although this time, it didn't seem that a rogue Bludger was trying to take his head off, he felt like a leaden weight had settled in his stomach as

he landed on the pitch with the rest of his team. They were out of the running for the European Cup.

When he and Sirius returned with Ron, Hermione and Snape to the entrance hall of Hogwarts, using their Portkey, Harry was surprised to find Professor McGonagall already there with Professor Figg and Professor Dumbledore.

"Ah, back from the match. We were listening on the wireless. Condolences, Harry, deepest condolences. It would have been nice to see a Hogwarts student in the Cup final, but you can't always catch the Snitch, unfortunately." Harry started to feel a little better, seeing Dumbledore up and around. His eyes didn't twinkle in quite the same way they used to, through those half-moon spectacles, but seeing him upright and speaking normally was certainly better than hearing him rasp at Professor McGonagall from his sickbed.

"Unfortunately, there was something else we were unable to catch. Or keep, rather. Ah, I have erred again; I should have said *someone*. We have some — er, news for you Harry." He paused and Harry frowned.

"What is it?"

Dumbledore looked sideways at McGonagall, then Figg, who finally said. "It's Petunia, Harry. She has decided to leave Hogwarts. She's already gone, as a matter of fact. There was no way to hold her against her will, nor would we. She just felt — out of place, you understand. As a new witch, and as an older student. It wasn't working." She seemed to be giving Snape a glare, as though it was his fault that a student in his house had felt the need to leave the school.

Harry couldn't believe it. "So — where's she gone? Back to Surrey?"

Dumbledore nodded. "So it seems. We will have the ministry check in on her from time to time, especially to monitor whether any magic is being performed. Hopefully we can keep anything the neighbors see to a bare minimum."

Harry swallowed. "Well, I reckon Uncle Vernon will be happy for her to be back." He nodded at Snape and smiled. "And I reckon you're a bit relieved, as well."

To his surprise, Snape actually broke into a smile, ignoring Arabella Figg's scowl. Dumbledore chuckled.

"I daresay you're right, Harry", he said, looking at Snape.

To his surprise, Snape suddenly *glared* at Dumbledore, something Harry had never seen him do, and then he turned on his heel and stalked down the stairs to the dungeons. Then *McGonagall* also glared at the headmaster and turned, sniffing, climbing the marble stairs, holding her robes up decorously. Harry turned to Ron and Hermione, who both shrugged, unsure what to make of this. Harry looked back at Dumbledore, who smiled broadly at him, something else Harry didn't usually see him do. (Small, subtle smiles, yes; broad smiles, no.)

Harry turned to the stairs himself, Ron and Hermione following behind with Sirius, wondering whether Dumbledore had changed because of what he'd been trying to do to Voldemort — and why that should make Snape and McGonagall suddenly dislike him. He looked over his shoulder at the headmaster, who met his gaze and winked at him. Harry turned away again, a bad feeling gnawing inside him.

Something was very wrong with Dumbledore.

Palace

"Now, wasn't that pleasant?"

A grinning Professor Arabella Figg looked around the large room at the more than three-dozen seventh year students, almost all of whom looked balefully back at her. "Would you be a dear and collect the parchments?" she said to Mandy Brocklehurst, seated in the first row. Mandy rose and began making her way through the rows of desks, taking the curling parchments from her classmates. "I do love surprise quizzes, don't you?" their professor asked the class rhetorically, an edge to her voice that Harry recognized.

I'll just bet she's missing having her television to make sarcastic comments to, he thought.

About two-thirds of the way back, Harry sat with Ron and Hermione; he glanced down with satisfaction at his own parchment. A quiz on curses wasn't a cause for panic for him. If there was one thing he'd become familiar with it was curses; painful curses, and avoiding the pain from them, although he hadn't had to do that in some time. The last time he'd needed to do that was — when he'd been burnt. He swallowed and tried not to think about poor Fleur in St. Mungo's. She'd been very queer when he was visiting with her. Like she wanted him to forgive her for hurting him because she was having a baby. He didn't blame her, not really. It was Roger Davies he blamed. And Draco Malfoy, a little. Although of all the things Malfoy had done, that actually wasn't the most upsetting to Harry.

He saw Malfoy hand his parchment to Mandy and met his eyes for a moment before looking away. Harry had found out why Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner hadn't been coming running with them in the mornings; they had been running on the road to Hogsmeade instead, as far as they could go and still stay on the Hogwarts grounds, then back again, over and over, instead of going round and round the Quidditch pitch with the rest of them. He'd found out quite by accident when he'd been especially tired after working on a Potions essay late into the night; he'd waved Ron on, asking him to tell the others that he'd be along in about twenty minutes. That meant that he was leaving the entrance hall for the Quidditch pitch late enough that he'd seen them on the Hogsmeade road, jogging back

toward the castle, but still a good five or ten minutes from reaching it. He didn't know whether they'd taken any notice of him, standing on the front steps of the castle, before he'd turned and walked round to the pitch.

Malfoy leaned back in his desk chair and looked like he was studiously ignoring Harry; he turned to say something to Crabbe and Goyle, whom he had given permission to follow him around again. They'd latched onto Blaise Zabini for a while, to Zabini's chagrin. Zabini didn't look disappointed to be rid of the two boulder-like boys. However, it was another Gryffindor nearby whom Malfoy was finding harder to ignore.

Neville Longbottom was handing Mandy his parchment, biting his lip nervously and looking like he was going to yank it back any second. But very quickly, it was too late; Mandy had shoved it into her growing pile of essays and had moved on to some Hufflepuffs who habitually sat together. Harry saw a glare of utter loathing contort Malfoy's face as he beheld Neville, and Harry was certain he would cower before this, but was surprised by Neville instead lifting his head and smiling sunnily at Malfoy, whose scowl intensified. Suddenly, under his robes, Harry heard Sandy's voice.

"The Dragon shall confront the Gardener."

The bell rang for lunch and about forty teenagers bolted noisily for the door, making it impossible for Harry to ask her whether she had any other information, and also resulting in an immediate bottleneck at the door to the classroom. Harry saw a tempting path he could take to cut through the crowd, but he hung back with Ron and Hermione, in part because Hermione was avoiding her former dorm mates, Parvati and Lavender, plus Parvati's sister Padma, who were all directly ahead. Harry grimaced. What a mess their seventh year was turning out to be. He remembered Moody telling them after the Three Broomsticks attack that they were all members of the same house, united, that they'd always be there for each other. He was glad that the old Auror wasn't at the school now to see how splintered the seventh-year Gryffindors had become.

When they finally reached the corridor it was a sea of black robes as students from Charms and Transfiguration also poured into the passage. Harry felt jostled by numerous bodies passing him; Ron and Hermione were moving along rather pokily again, and he didn't dare leave them alone. Ron had begged him not to; any time Hermione managed to get Ron alone, she started in on the argument that she was still his girlfriend, and

he couldn't break up with her. She didn't try it when Harry or other people were around, so Ron required Harry to be with them at all times. Harry was growing quite weary of it.

Then the other students moving forward stopped abruptly; there was a solid wall of bodies in front of them, and Harry frowned at Ron and Hermione, wondering what it was. He didn't need to wonder any longer when a laconic drawl cut through the low murmur of the crowd:

"Let's see what you've got, Longbottom. You're not taking that memory potion anymore. I can guarantee you this won't be like that time you trounced Potter. Not that I didn't enjoy *that*..."

Now Harry knew exactly what Sandy had been talking about. Harry, Ron and Hermione pushed their way through the crowd, which had left a clear space about ten feet in diameter where Draco Malfoy and Neville Longbottom were facing each other, wands drawn. Neville was the one scowling at Malfoy, looking no longer like the little boy who had lost his toad on the Hogwarts Express their first year. Harry was surprised to see how much he resembled his dad now, although he could see some of Gemma Longbottom there, too.

Neville and Draco circled each other warily as the crowd became noisier; and suddenly, at the edge of the circle, Seamus Finnigan called out, "Wipe up the floor with him, Nev!"

A number of other students agreed noisily, and Dean added, "You'll be sorry, Malfoy!"

Hermione scowled impatiently. "Neville!" she cried indignantly. "Just what do you think you're doing? And you, Malfoy! You're a prefect! Both of you stop this at once!"

For his part, Neville seemed to be ignoring everyone — Hermione and supporters alike. Crabbe and Goyle were grunting in support of Malfoy, but he seemed to be ignoring his erstwhile friends as well. Draco Malfoy and Neville Longbottom looked at no one but each other, circling slowly, white-knuckled hands clenched on their wands. Harry felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up; there was a crackling in the air as the ambient magic in the area increased with Draco and Neville's agitation. He wondered whether one of them was about to perform wandless magic.

"What's this about, Malfoy?" Neville finally asked through gritted teeth, although Harry could hear a slight shake in his voice.

"What's this about? What the hell do you think this is about? It's about Ginny, you idiot!" Malfoy spat at him, still circling slowly, at exactly the same speed as Neville. Harry saw Neville swallow.

"What about Ginny? This is such a public place; are you sure you want to dwell on the fact that you weren't enough man for her?"

Harry was shocked; this sounded so strange coming out of Neville's mouth. And then he thought about the implication of Neville's words. *No, surely not...*

Draco Malfoy was blind with rage now. "*Tracheo suo passus* — " he began without warning, pointing his wand at Neville's neck.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Harry cried suddenly, pointing his wand at Malfoy, who went careering back into the crowd, his wand soaring up into the air and then falling into Harry's waiting hand. Next to him, Hermione breathed what seemed to be a sigh of relief. He turned to her, saying, "You want to take care of the house points, Hermione?"

She nodded, glaring at both Malfoy and Neville. "Thank you, Harry. But first —" She looked round at the assembled students. "Move along! Before I start taking even more house points from anyone left gawping!" she warned. Suddenly, there was a rush of feet on the floor all around them, until only Harry, Ron, Hermione, Malfoy and Neville remained in the high, echoing corridor.

Malfoy was standing against the wall, still glaring at Neville and Harry. Neville had that strange look in his eyes again.

"What's wrong, Malfoy? Don't want to duel without an audience?"

A glare was his response, followed by, "I also don't seem to have my wand, Longbottom. But wand or no wand, if I find out you and Ginny have done anything, even if it's just extended snogging, so help me I'll —"

Neville laughed. "She told me you'd feel that way." Harry couldn't help but think that Neville was more afraid than he was letting on. The frightening thing to Harry was that *he* felt very, very close to joining Malfoy against Neville, two against one, and he'd had to muster every bit of his self-control (plus remind himself that he was Head Boy) when he'd disarmed Malfoy.

Malfoy shook his head now. "No, no. I will not believe that she'd stoop that low. Not with you. Potter I could believe; for her to be with *you* would be like calling night day and purple green... It's just *wrong*."

Neville smirked. "Then I suppose we shouldn't invite you to the Astronomy Tower this afternoon for a little show —"

But suddenly, Malfoy was the least of Neville's problems. Ron strode across the corridor and picked Neville up by the front of his robes, banging his back against the stone wall, making a nearby classroom door shudder in its frame. "If I find out you and Ginny — that you two have —"

Neville held up his hands, all conciliatory now, smiling feebly. "Ron! Ron, old mate! Forgot you were here. Of course Ginny and I haven't done anything, of course not!" His voice seemed to be about an octave higher than usual. Ron glared at him, still not releasing his hold. Finally, Hermione strode up to him.

"Ten points from Gryffindor, Ron!" she said sharply. He turned and looked at her in surprise, a little less angry. He slowly lowered Neville's feet to the floor and let go of his robes. Hermione looked like she was biting her tongue painfully, so she wouldn't say anything else.

"You sure?" Ron asked Neville, eyeing him suspiciously. Neville nodded vigorously.

"That wasn't what you were implying a minute ago!" Malfoy whinged.

Neville looked back and forth between the two of them, evidently torn between antagonizing Ginny's brother or purposefully winding up her former boyfriend. "Well, erm, I mean —" he stuttered.

Harry turned to Ron in surprise; something had just struck him. "Ron! That's the most — *you* I've seen you be since you got back from hospital."

Ron drew his lips into a line. "Yeah, well — I stopped taking my medicine last night. It helps me control my temper and — some other things. But the full moon's in a week and I have to start taking the Wolfsbane Potion again tonight, and the two potions aren't compatible, so I'm off the other stuff for the next week."

Hermione looked at him with wide eyes. "Oooh! *That's* why you were acting that way!"

Ron turned to her. "What way?" But Harry knew just what she meant. He didn't quite know how to put it into words without insulting his best friend, though.

"Like a bleeding zombie, Weasel", Malfoy drawled, obviously feeling no compunctions about insulting Ron. "Like you'd had Cruciatus put on you for too long and what passes for your brain had turned to mush —"

Suddenly Neville had sprung into action again and leaped forward, his wand not two inches from Draco Malfoy's chest. "Don't say another word, Malfoy! Not if you know what's good for you!" His voice was low and dangerous, and Harry was shocked. Yet he knew he shouldn't be; he'd been incensed enough about Aunt Marge insulting his father that he'd accidentally inflated her. If there was something that was a better definition of "bad form" than making tactless comments about someone's dead or perpetually hospitalized parents, he couldn't think of it. Harry had never seen Neville look murderous before, and it was a bit of a jolt; he had never been more mindful of the fact that both of his parents had been Aurors.

Draco Malfoy was still unarmed; he backed up against the wall and held up his hands now, his eyes wide. "What the hell —? What are you upset about now, you ponce? What did I say?" Harry could tell that it was the strangest thing in the world to him to be visibly afraid of Neville Longbottom.

And then Harry realized that of course Malfoy didn't know about Neville's parents. He moved to stand next to Neville, putting his hand on his wand arm and forcing Neville to lower it. "He doesn't know, Nev. He doesn't know", he said quietly, his hand around the other boy's wrist now..

Neville turned to Harry, looking at him blankly, as though he didn't recognize him. When the vacant expression left Neville's eyes, he had the good grace to flush as he put his wand back into his robes. "Sorry, Harry. You're right, of course. I just — I always feel like *everyone* knows..."

Draco Malfoy threw up his hands. "*What* don't I know? That everyone in Gryffindor should have checked themselves into St. Mungo's, not just Weasley? Sorry to disappoint you all, but *that* I know."

Suddenly, Harry had to push Neville back again, and was surprised by the effort it took; it felt like he was about to go for Malfoy with just his bare hands, his eyes ablaze with fury. "What you don't know, Malfoy", he hissed, as he continued to struggle against Harry, "is that my parents have been in St. Mungo's for the last sixteen years because *Death Eaters* put Cruciatus on them for too long, and it turned their brains to *mush*, as you like to put it." To his credit, Draco Malfoy actually looked shocked and sympathetic — for him.

"They're — they're *what*?" he whispered. "Jesus, Longbottom. You're not serious..." he breathed, shaking his head. Then he looked like he'd had

an epiphany. "Oh, is *that* what you were talking about when we came to see you at St. Mungo's, Potter? You said something about Fleur being like the Longbottoms, something about Cruciatus being put on them for a long time... Didn't know what you were on about at the time, but I didn't care enough to ask, frankly."

"Actually", Ron said, stepping forward now. "I met your mum and dad while I was in hospital, Nev. Same ward", he added sheepishly, his ears turning a little pink. "And they weren't doing *too* badly." Ron sounded like he was soft-pedaling their condition. "Except for the memory thing, of course", he added feebly.

Malfoy frowned. "Memory thing?"

Ron nodded. "Yeah. No short term memory. I played chess with Neville's dad in the common room a few times. Every couple of minutes I had to reintroduce myself to him; he'd forgotten who I was, didn't think he'd ever seen me before. And then he'd look down at the chessboard, all surprised that it was there, and say, 'Oh, I must be taking over for whoever was playing you, son. Whose turn is it? Am I black?' And we'd go on, make one or two moves, and it would start all over again. A couple of times he decided that he probably *shouldn't* be sitting there, that he'd probably taken someone's seat who was in the middle of a chess game, and then I was stuck there with a half-finished game." He shrugged. "He wasn't being rude; he just didn't know."

Harry was shocked. Ron hadn't said anything about meeting the Longbottoms before. But Neville nodded now. "Yeah. That's why ever since I can remember, when Gran takes me to visit, and she tells them who I am, they say, 'No, that's not Neville; our boy's a little bloke, not even two...' That's how they remember me. And to them — it was about five minutes ago that it happened. For the rest of their lives, it will always be five minutes after they were attacked. They remember their earlier lives, and things like the rules to chess. But every time they look up and everything seems new to them again, someone has to explain where they are and who the people around them are and things like that." His voice had grown very soft; he looked down and away from the four of them, while Hermione stepped forward and put her hand gently on his arm.

They were very quiet for a minute; then Harry said, "Why don't you three go down to lunch? I want to talk to Malfoy."

They all looked at him in surprise, except that Malfoy's expression was also tinged with suspicion. Ron hooked his arm over Neville's shoulders and started steering him away. "Yes, Nev. I do believe we need to have a talk about *my little sister*..."

Harry saw Hermione frown at him before turning and walking with Neville and Ron to the Great Hall. Malfoy was eyeing him distrustfully.

"Mind if I have my wand back now, Potter?"

Harry had been holding both his wand and Malfoy's in his right hand. He handed Malfoy's back to him and, still eyeing each other, they put their wands in their robes. Harry leaned against the wall and crossed his arms.

"So — what made you suddenly attack Neville like that?"

Malfoy made a face. "You have to ask? God, I don't know how you can stand seeing them together. And don't tell me what they get up to in your common room; I don't think my stomach could take it. Admit it, Potter — seeing Ginny with Longbottom gets under your skin as much as it does mine."

Harry looked away from him now, knowing that the truth would be seen in his eyes. "Maybe it does", he admitted softly. "But I thought you were with Mariah now. Why are you worrying about Ginny when you've got a new girlfriend?"

Malfoy paced, running his fingers through his hair. "I just — the way we split up — well, I didn't notice that being with Granger kept you from worrying what Ginny was getting up to, when you were still together", he countered.

Harry nodded, admitting this. "That's true", he said quietly. "But — I don't know. I saw you and Mariah running on the Hogsmeade Road, and that Crabbe and Goyle are hanging about with you lately, and I just —" He stopped, not sure how to go on. "You had them for friends before, but you still said you'd never had a *real* friend. I just thought — well, having both been told off by Ginny, I guess we have a bit more in common now in addition to the Prophecy..."

Draco Malfoy smirked at him. "Oh, and you're offering to be my friend? Let me see — this wouldn't have anything to do with a certain Obedience Charm, would it? 'I'll just be Draco Malfoy's friend, so he doesn't decide to murder me'. I'm not stupid, Potter. Now that I'm not with Ginny, you reckon you'll be my connection to the goody-goodness that is Gryffindor. Yeah. As if I need that. And if I *did* feel the need to hang about

with a Gryffindor, I'd rather it were the Head Girl than the Head Boy. At least I'd have something to *look* at, then. And I reckon as each day passes that neither you nor Weasley agree to shag her — have I *mentioned* what complete *idiots* the pair of you are? — she may eventually see that she has another, far *better* option before her..."

Harry clenched and unclenched his fists, breathing deeply to keep his cool. "First, Malfoy, you do *not* speak about Hermione that way. You *have* a girlfriend, and Mariah would probably hex you good if she heard you say that. I don't know why I have to keep telling you how to be a good boyfriend. It's getting pretty tiring. Second — I was offering to be your friend because you said once that you needed a real friend, and technically, we already were friends. I have memories of those times, in a Pensieve, and I wondered whether you'd like to see it some time."

Malfoy looked shocked. "Did — did Nanny Bella — er, Professor Figg — help you break through the memory charms? Oh, wow. I can't believe it..."

Harry grimaced. "Er, no. Not exactly. But — well, I can't really explain right now. And at the moment we need to get down to lunch. But — I thought it was about time I told you this. I thought you should know, that you should understand..."

Malfoy squinted at him. "Now you're being cryptic, Potter. If you're not going to show this to me now, let's just go eat."

Harry nodded and they made their way toward the entrance hall. As they descended the broad marble stairs, Draco Malfoy stopped suddenly and asked, "Oh, by the way, how's your aunt? I haven't seen her at the Slytherin table for a while. Is she sick? She hasn't asked me to walk Dunkirk at all, either."

Harry stopped. No one had told Malfoy. "Er, there's something I need to tell you, Malfoy."

"What?"

"Aunt Petunia's gone."

"Gone?" He frowned. "What d'you mean *gone*?"

"She decided to leave Hogwarts."

Malfoy's mouth hung open in shock. "Well — well no one told *me*. When the hell did this happen? Did — did she take the dog with her too?" he asked, a little wistfully.

Harry sighed. "Of course she took her dog with her, you git. When I got back from the match against France, Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape told me. They didn't tell *you* because you're not her nephew, just her dog-walker."

Malfoy scowled at him and Harry immediately regretted these words. "Oh, how I wish I'd gone to that match when you were trounced by France! Seeing you *lose* Potter, isn't something I —"

"— can do just anytime", Harry finished smugly, his arms crossed.

They had reached the Great Hall. "So", Malfoy said, "can I see this Pensieve thing after lunch?" he asked. Harry thought he was trying to sound casual about it, but suspected that he was very keen.

"Today isn't good. After lunch I have Apparition."

Malfoy looked superior. "Oh, *that's* right. You don't have your license yet. Well, some other time then. And in the meantime, even if you don't mean it — tell Longbottom to sleep with one eye open. Just to unnerve him. I have to go eat now with my back to the Gryffindor table, so I don't risk seeing the two of them together and spew all over the place."

Some students near them made faces upon hearing him say "spew", and Malfoy moved off toward the Slytherin table, ignoring them and without looking again at Harry. Harry strode toward the Gryffindor table and sat between Ron and Hermione, grabbing a sandwich and starting to take large bites out of it, as lunch was almost over. He tried not to notice Neville and Ginny sitting together farther down the table, and wondered whether anyone had told her what had happened in the upstairs corridor.

Ron looked suspiciously at Harry. "What did you want to talk to him about, then?"

Harry shrugged. "Tell you later. When we're back from Apparition."

Hermione jogged his elbow as he tried to take another bite of his sandwich. "Harry! Ron! Mum and dad sent me a copy of the *Times* this morning, and I've just had the chance to read it. Alicia's dad is a Member of Parliament now!" She shoved the paper in front of Harry so that he could see the long article about the new MPs, including Alicia Spinnet's father.

"Well, that's what Roger and Alicia were supposed to be working towards. Now that he's in, I wonder what they'll do? Alicia can't just go back to the village school in Hogsmeade; they've probably already

replaced her", Harry said through a mouthful of food. He set the paper aside without reading it.

Hermione shrugged. "He'll still need a staff. Maybe they'll work in his office in London. When you're an MP you need people to answer your phones, do research, deal with the press, schedule meetings with constituents..."

Harry swallowed a large bite after minimal chewing. "I reckon. And won't they both need to make sure the press don't find out that his daughter and son-in-law are a witch and wizard?"

Ron took a swig of pumpkin juice. "I reckon that's why they worked for him before he was elected — to hush up that sort of talk, so it wouldn't come out."

"Right", Hermione agreed. "If Fleet Street got hold of that, it might sound more like he *thought* his daughter was a witch, and then he'd be discredited, as though he said the sun goes around the earth..."

"It *does*?" Ron said in mock surprise and horror. "I thought it rose in the south and set in the north, carried through the sky on the back of an enormous turtle, and when he burps, that's when we get hail, and when he..." Ron couldn't go on, he was laughing so hard at his own joke. Hermione rolled her eyes. Harry struggled to swallow another bite of sandwich through his own laughter.

"Don't do that!" he choked out when he could — barely — speak again. "Are you two trying to kill me?"

They apologized; even Hermione was laughing now (at Harry's struggles with his food), but Harry couldn't help but think about the boy sitting on the other side of the Great Hall, his back to the Gryffindor table so he couldn't see Ginny with Neville. No, his two best friends would never really do anything to hurt him. But Draco Malfoy might. Harry hadn't wanted to tell him how spot-on he was; once he had the thought of being Malfoy's friend to avoid any possible problems with the Obedience Charm, he wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. He just needed to show him what good friends they'd been in his other life, and how awful the world had been with Voldemort virtually in charge. Surely he couldn't see that without being affected — could he?

He rose to leave for Apparition and glanced at the Slytherin table, remembering when he'd first run over there as an excited first-year, in his

other life, ecstatic that he was going to be in the same house as his dad and best mate.

You'll see, Malfoy. We can do this — we can be friends. In this life. It'll just take a little effort...

As Neville and Ginny left the Great Hall hand in hand, Harry tried not to seethe, and then he saw that Malfoy, also moving toward the door and seeing them, had made a rude gesture behind their backs.

Correction, Harry thought, a little wearily.

A lot of effort...

* * *

When they returned to the Gryffindor Tower from Apparition, Neville stopped Harry before he entered. Harry waved on Ron and Hermione, so that he and Neville were standing alone in the corridor with the portrait of the Fat Lady.

Harry felt rather weary. "What is it, Neville?"

Neville opened his mouth to speak, closed it again, then opened it once more. After two more false starts, Harry said, "Well, when you figure out what you actually want to say — don't contact me. Bye", he added, moving toward the portrait and opening his mouth to give the password.

"Wait! No, Harry. Sorry, I just — I'm not sure how to talk about this."

Harry turned and frowned, having a sinking feeling he knew what Neville was talking about. "Don't you mean *her*? As in Ginny?"

Neville nodded nervously. "Listen, Harry, Ginny told me about — about the two of you. And about you and Mariah. And Draco Malfoy and Mariah. I couldn't believe it. I understand now, and I don't blame you for being upset about the situation. Who wouldn't be upset? But I just wanted to check — that *we're* all right."

"Huh? We?"

"You and me. I just..." Neville looked a bit embarrassed now. "I don't want you to hate me, Harry. Since — since you still care for her and all."

Harry didn't deny Neville's last statement. He swallowed, looking at the other boy's earnest face, thinking of his parents not recognizing him, of the cauldrons he'd melted over the years (and the points Snape had taken from Gryffindor because of it); he thought of losing the duel to him and then sitting vigil by his bedside when he'd become addicted to the potions that had helped him win the duel.

He felt deflated. "No, Neville", he sighed. "I don't hate you."

Neville peered at him doubtfully. "You sure?"

Harry rolled his eyes now. "Yes, I'm sure. I don't hate you." It helped to say it aloud, it actually did; he realized now that he'd been trying to convince himself that he hated Neville, and he also realized why that hadn't worked. He couldn't talk himself into disliking someone he liked any more than he could talk himself into liking someone he disliked. (He'd tried that with Dunkirk, to no avail.)

"Oh, that's great, Harry!" Neville said, bobbing about on the balls of his feet, making Harry fear that a hug was imminent.

He gave the password to the Fat Lady and said, "S'okay, Neville. Don't worry about it", as he stepped over the threshold into the Gryffindor common room. Unfortunately, the first thing that greeted him was a row between Ron and Hermione, which was suddenly reminding him of their row after the Yule Ball in fourth year.

"Be reasonable, Ron!"

"Reasonable! Oh, you want the great hairy animal to be *reasonable*! Well, I'll give you reasonable. It's not reasonable to expect an animal to behave like a different animal, is it? Take Harry's snake Sandy, for instance."

"Ron, stop bringing up irrelevant things..."

"It's *not* irrelevant. Harry turned her into a girl, yeah. But she couldn't stop *being* a snake. Not really. She was still *her*. The sort of things she said, the stuff she didn't know. She looked human, but she was still a snake deep down. You can tell yourself that I'm the same old Ron as much as you like, but the fact is, that isn't true. He's gone. He died when Lupin —"

He stopped, biting his lip; Harry saw that he was making it bleed. "I — I know he feels bad about that. Worse than bad. And I don't ever want to feel that way about someone else. I feel dreadful enough about hurting Parvati..."

He ran his hand through his hair, the white lock flopping over his brow amidst the red. Hermione backed up from him, then turned and met Harry's eye; she looked like she'd been crying. Luckily, no one else was in the common room. Then he saw that she'd spotted Neville.

"Neville!" she cried, sounding triumphant. Ginny came down the stairs from the girls' dorm.

"Neville!" she also said, approaching him. "I've got my things. Why don't you get yours, and then we can go to the library and —"

"Sorry", Hermione interrupted her. "I need Neville right now. Come on, Neville." She grabbed him by the hand and pulled him back toward the portrait hole. He stumbled after her.

"But — but Ginny and I were —"

"Not anymore. Come on." She opened the portrait and then suddenly pulled Neville's mouth to hers. He grunted an inarticulate protest, then stumbled after her again when she pulled on the front of his robes, giving him no choice but to follow her.

Ron, Ginny and Harry stood looking at the back of the closed portrait with their mouths open. Ginny turned to Ron and said, "But — but Neville —"

Harry felt very uncomfortable. Then he noticed that Ginny looked flustered, but not dreadfully jealous. He peered at her, interested in this reaction. "Aren't you going to try to get your boyfriend back, Ginny?" he asked her suddenly. She jerked her head around as though she'd just woken up, then scowled and strode to the portrait hole and left without a word.

Ron stood looking at Harry with rather pink ears. Finally, he also moved toward the portrait hole. Harry smiled. "Good. You're going after her", he said with satisfaction. Ron stopped and shook his head without looking at Harry.

Still facing away from him, he corrected Harry's mistake. "Actually, it's time for my potion." He continued on, and after that Harry was standing alone in the common room.

* * *

The next morning, Harry didn't have a class first thing, but he did have a fourth shift he'd taken for a fifth-year Ravenclaw, Kurt Harrison, who was getting very obsessive about O.W.L. revision. (Harry had made the mistake of telling him how many O.W.L.s he'd received when he asked.) He was patrolling with the other fifth-year Ravenclaw prefect, Jade Peters, plus both sixth-year Ravenclaws, Trixie Lewis and Walter Word; he reckoned that when he was done, at seven in the morning, he'd want to sleep until ten o'clock and then grab some food from the kitchens before going to History of Magic, where he would probably be able to continue sleeping.

On his way back to the Gryffindor common room, he passed Ron, Tony and Ruth, on their way out to go running. Harry frowned.

"Where are Ginny and Hermione?" he asked the three of them.

"Hermione wanted to talk to Ginny about something", Ruth told him, gesturing toward Gryffindor Tower. "She said they'd be along."

Harry nodded, but when he gave the password to the Fat Lady and the portrait started to open, some instinct told him to wait before entering; holding the portrait open a crack, he looked into the common room and saw Ginny and Hermione standing facing each other, Ginny with her arms crossed obstinately, Hermione flailing her arms in entreaty.

"Oh, come on, Ginny! You didn't see Malfoy in the corridor; he would have hurt Neville if there hadn't been so many people around. You can't put him at risk anymore. It's not fair to him."

Ginny lifted her chin. "Neville isn't afraid of Draco. And that was so *obviously* for show I'm surprised you missed it. Neville told me the way it started. It was *meant* to be so that as many people as possible would see how much Draco still wanted to be with me. Don't you think if Draco really wanted to hurt Neville he'd find a way to do it as sneakily as possible, so it couldn't ever be traced back to him? No, he was putting on a little show yesterday. It was his This-is-how-much-I-love-you-Ginny-so-please-come-back-to-me show. He knew I'd find out about it. Showing his love and devotion before a crowd. That's what he was trying to do, not hurt Neville. That was just an excuse."

"And what makes you think he won't *also* try something a bit less public? Neville's got a huge bullseye on himself right now, and it's just not fair to him, Ginny."

Ginny was sputtering. "I can't believe you! You tell Ron that he shouldn't be afraid of hurting you like he hurt Parvati, but if I continue to see Neville, I'm putting him in danger from my big bad ex-boyfriend. What you're proposing sounds far more dangerous to me, Hermione. I mean — if I had to choose between fearing Draco Malfoy or —"

"Erm —" Harry said as he entered, and then cleared his throat; he'd been unable to wait to go up to the dorm any longer — he *really* needed to visit the loo.

"Good morning, girls", he said somewhat stiffly. The both stopped and turned crimson, for some reason.

"Ah, good morning, Harry", Hermione said brightly, after initially hesitating. "I think we should go running now", she added hurriedly, grabbing Ginny's wrist and dragging her toward the portrait hole.

Harry wasn't sure whether to try to figure out what the girls had been talking about — was it just that Hermione thought Neville was in danger from Malfoy? — or just wait for it to come out later. As he was very tired, he opted for the latter and dragged himself up to bed.

The next morning, he paused before going to the Quidditch pitch with the others for the morning run. "I'll be right there", he said, watching Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Ruth and Tony walk on ahead. Ruth and Tony were holding hands and swinging their arms. *Oh well*, he thought. *One happy couple, at least.*

He waited on the top steps of the castle, hands in his pockets, looking at the morning sky, and a few minutes later, the heavy wooden door opened again and Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner emerged in their running clothes. They stopped in their tracks when they saw Harry.

Malfoy frowned. "What now, Potter? You still haven't shown me — that thing you were going to show me." He looked worried that Mariah might figure out what he meant.

"I was knackered yesterday. And besides, I had to get it ready. How about after breakfast?"

Malfoy regarded him with his arms crossed over his chest. "All right", he said guardedly. "Mind if we go running now?"

"Yeah, actually, I do."

Malfoy dropped his arms and stepped toward Harry. "Excuse me?" he said, a challenge in his voice.

"I mind you doing it on your own. Stop the self-segregation thing. Come back to the Quidditch pitch with the rest of us."

Mariah looked at Draco as though afraid of what his reaction would be. They she looked shyly at Harry.

"Do — do ye forgive me, Harry?"

He drew his lips into a line. "You're not the first person who's done something with good intentions and had it go bad. Yeah, I reckon I forgive you. I — I *understand* what you were trying to do..."

She nodded and gave him a small smile. "Thank you."

Malfoy looked at him, his chin lifted. "Well, I'm not asking for forgiveness from you."

Harry looked at him levelly. "I didn't ask you to. I just asked you to stop playing the martyr and come run with the rest of us."

"That's not what you said the first time."

He shrugged. "I didn't say what I thought the reason was for the self-segregation."

"Think I'm playing the martyr, do you?"

Harry sighed. "Do you really think this is the time to discuss this? We can get into it later. I'm going down to the Quidditch pitch. Are you two coming or not?"

Malfoy looked uncertainly at Mariah. She tilted her head in entreaty and he nodded at Harry. "All right. You, erm, haven't said anything to Weasley or Granger about — things I said the other day, have you?"

Harry gave him a lopsided smile, to keep him guessing for a moment. "Relax. You're safe", he finally said, laughing. He turned to go down the steps and they fell in behind him. When they reached the pitch, he wasn't quite prepared for how surprised the others looked. *Damn*, he thought. *Don't make me regret doing this*, he thought at them, hoping they'd do the right thing.

To their credit, they did. While Hermione and Ron were warming up by doing katas, Tony and Ruth were spotting each other while doing sit-ups; they rose and each offered to do the same for Draco and Mariah. Which left Harry with Ginny. They didn't speak, just did some stretching next to each other, looking off into the distance. Except that once, Harry turned and caught her eye, and the expression he saw there made him catch his breath with hope. She was completely unguarded, not having expected him to turn his head, and after locking eyes with her for what seemed to be a very long moment, he turned away as the others ended their stretching and prepared to start running.

I was just imagining it, he told himself, trying not to get his hopes up. He glanced at Draco Malfoy, who was scowling at Harry. Harry hoped he'd still meet to look at the Pensieve after breakfast.

When they were done, Mariah was spotting Ginny while doing sit-ups this time, and Harry was helping Hermione while Ron did some more kata. "Hermione", he whispered to. "Look at Mariah and Ginny. They seem to be getting along now."

Hermione turned her head when she was sitting up, then back when she needed to go back down to the ground. "Could be. I expect Ginny had to cool down eventually. They were actually friends for a while..."

Harry shook his head. "Don't you think it's strange? I thought Ginny was going to *kill* her", he whispered. Hermione didn't respond, just

continued to do her sit-ups while he held her ankles and glanced at Ginny and Mariah — especially Ginny, who, despite the colder weather, was wearing shorts for running. Following the line of her long legs from the bottoms of her shorts to her ankle was more torture than he could bear, so he tried to focus on something else again, and thought about the things he would show Malfoy in his Pensieve; he'd spent his second free period organizing it after lunch the day before.

After the boys showered and bathed in the boy prefects' bathroom (Ron simply went along with the three others now, no more protesting about his not being a prefect), they all trooped down to the Great Hall for breakfast. There weren't many people present, as it was Saturday and many of the students slept late. Breakfast would remain on the tables in the Great Hall until nearly ten-thirty, to accommodate the late-risers.

When he'd had some eggs, toast and bacon, Harry turned to see what Draco Malfoy was up to; when he turned he found that the Slytherin was already looking at him. Harry nodded and Malfoy nodded back. Harry finished chewing and stood, walking toward the anteroom just off the Great Hall. He was gratified when, a minute later, Draco Malfoy understood he was to go in the same room, and he stepped in and closed the door.

"Right, Malfoy. You understood..."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Blind beggars in Micronesia understood what you were getting at, Potter. So. Where's this Pensieve?"

"Upstairs still. I need to tell you a few things first. To explain."

And so he once again launched into the story of how Voldemort had stopped him from getting onto Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters at the beginning of his sixth year, how he'd changed time when he saved his mother (he didn't mention the Imperius Curse) and how, when he woke up in his other life, Snape was his stepfather and Draco Malfoy was his best friend.

"*What?*" Malfoy said in disbelief. "This is ridiculous. I didn't come here for a fairy-story..."

"It's not. It really happened." He explained the way Snape had never been exposed, the way Lucius Malfoy thought he was still a loyal Death Eater, who was now keeping an eye on one of the people in the Prophecy, bringing him up to serve the Dark Lord. "He and my mum had to socialize

with your mum and dad a lot because of that, and so we were together quite a lot. Well, and Jamie too."

"Your sister", Malfoy said in a disbelieving monotone.

"Right. She became your girlfriend."

Malfoy's pale eyebrows flew up in surprise. "Really! You permitted me to be with your sister!"

Harry scuffed the stone floor with his feet. "She was in love with you", he said, addressing the stone flags. When he raised his eyes again, he saw that Malfoy's expression of disbelief had been replaced by avidness.

"All right, all right, so where the hell is it?"

Harry checked his watch. "It's late enough now that the other blokes should be out of our dorm. I don't want to carry it very far; it's rather full. You have to come upstairs."

Malfoy swallowed and Harry wondered why he was so nervous. "Why didn't you tell me about this before? You said Granger and Weasley know. And Ginny. And even Snape and Dumbledore. Oh, and Sirius." Harry was startled for a moment, not having realized that he called Sirius by his first name.

"I felt they needed to know. They kept wondering how I *knew* things. Things I learned in my other life. But I didn't know how to tell *you* some of the things that happened in that life. Things like our being best friends. And things like —" He paused nervously, trying to get his nerve up. Finally, he just blurted it out. "Things like Ginny being my girlfriend."

Malfoy had been turning toward the door; now he turned and faced Harry, his eyes very round. "What? Ginny was your girlfriend? Typical", he snarled. "Gryffindors sticking together..."

"But I wasn't a Gryffindor. I — I was a Slytherin. Because I wanted to be with you, and Snape. My best friend and my dad."

"*Dad*," Malfoy mouthed, shaking his head. "So she was with you even though you were a Slytherin?" Harry nodded, surprised to see a smirk on Malfoy's face. "I think she's attracted to the forbiddenness of it. She *likes* knowing people think it's wrong", he said suggestively. Harry could tell he was just trying to get him wound up.

"Maybe", he conceded. "I was also stalking her from the age of eleven."

Malfoy squeaked again. "Stalking her! Bloody hell, Potter. And she went for you even after that?"

Harry shrugged. "It's rather a long story. Come on. Let's go now. You'll see what I mean."

When walked through the Great Hall, very few straggling students were seated at the house tables eating their breakfasts and no one took any notice of Harry and Draco Malfoy. However, when, after climbing stair after stair, they were finally outside the Gryffindor common room, Harry hesitated.

"Hmm. I don't know that I should just walk into our common room with you. A few people might think it's strange, or compromising security. Tell you what, you hide down the corridor there a little ways; I'll give the password and go in, then come back out with my Invisibility Cloak. You can put it on and come in without anyone knowing you're in Gryffindor Tower. Okay?"

Malfoy shrugged and agreed. When he was well away, Harry whispered the password to the Fat Lady and the portrait swung open. Harry saw a few younger students in the common room, plus Seamus and Dean. He didn't see Ron or Hermione anywhere, or Neville and Ginny. He strode up to his dorm and was relieved to find it empty. He was back at the portrait hole a minute later, the cloak tucked under his robes. He opened the portrait, stepped into the corridor while holding it open, hissing, "*Come on!*" to Malfoy, who came running quickly. Harry draped the cloak over him while they were both in the corridor with the portrait open, and then Harry shoved his unseen form into the common room, crossing to the boys' stairs again without anyone noticing that he was being rather inconstant in his desire to go or stay.

When they reached the seventh-year dorm, Harry closed the door and reached out to remove the cloak from Malfoy. He suddenly appeared, looking more shocked than Harry had thought he'd be.

"Blimey. I've seen that common room — late at night, anyway — and I kind of thought it was nicer than ours, but this is *really* —"

Harry grinned. "Yeah. When I landed in my other life, it was really hard to get used to the Slytherin dorms. This is so high up and airy. If you didn't have claustrophobia when you started living in Slytherin House, you would have it before long..."

He strode to his trunk and put the cloak in, then, still bending over, he gently took the Pensieve in his hands and lifted it out, turning to place it

on Ron's trunk. He closed his own trunk and sat on it. "Any other questions before we do this?"

Draco Malfoy looked at the Pensieve and swallowed, but then he also shook his head. "What do I do?"

"Take out your wand."

He did as he was told, stirring the milky substance in the stone bowl with his wand, then bending over, as Harry told him, until his nose touched the cold surface. There was a rushing sound, and then Draco Malfoy was inside Harry's Pensieve.

* * *

They were in the caretaker's office. They watched the other Harry, the one with no scar and the Scots accent, turn to Ginny. Malfoy had teased mercilessly about the accent when he'd first landed in the Pensieve. Now, after seeing random snatches of years of memories, the accent coming out of the other Harry seemed quite natural, as was the absence of the scar.

The other Harry didn't have a chance to say anything before she had launched herself at him, throwing her arms around his neck and pulling his mouth down to hers. Harry turned to look at Draco Malfoy; this wasn't the first time he'd shown him kissing Ginny. He'd tried to prepare him, to explain that in *that* life, Draco Malfoy had never been interested in Ginny Weasley.

"But weren't you still seeing Granger on September first, when you sort of crossed over?"

Harry looked away. "Yeah, I was technically still with Hermione. I know, I know..."

Harry hadn't included any instances that involved clothing being removed, even a little; he didn't want to invade his and Ginny's privacy quite to that degree. He didn't include anything from their night in the Quidditch changing rooms, but he indicated obliquely that they'd slept together, partly for warmth. Malfoy gave him a look he couldn't decipher.

"Do you think I'm daft? Of course you slept together! You don't have to tell me. I'm not Weasley. He doesn't know, does he?" Harry admitted that he hadn't told him or Hermione or Ginny. "But you're telling me", he said softly.

Harry nodded. "It was another life. It was once. And — it didn't really go very well... It wasn't under ideal circumstances or anything..."

Malfoy looked conflicted. "Is this more of showing me what we have in common? Because last time I checked, I'd never had the chance to actually consummate our relationship."

"Shh", was Harry's only answer. The other Harry and Ginny were kissing deeply, and Harry could see now that Draco Malfoy was experiencing it vicariously, his jaw open slightly as he watched, his eyes slightly glazed; Harry thought he was probably remembering what it was like to kiss Ginny. He shivered with the memory himself, trying not to show how affected he was.

Harry-the-Slytherin opened his lips and drank her in, holding her face up with one hand, bringing his other hand around to press against the small of her back; he kissed her as though he never would again, and Harry remembered the feeling of her fingers entwined in his hair, her warm body pressed against him. He broke the kiss and pulled her to him even more closely, pressing his face into her hair, Harry remembered that he'd had to try very hard not to cry. He pulled back and looked at her, his hands framing her face. "I love you, Ginny. I love you so much..."

She nodded. "I love you, too", she whispered hoarsely; she sounded as though her throat were too constricted to function. She started crying first; he tasted the saltiness as he lavished kisses on her forehead, her cheeks, the orbits beneath her brows, her chin, her nose... Finally, he seemed to realize that he had to make her go, before he started to weep as well.

"Good bye, Ginny", he said softly.

She moved toward the opening. "Good bye, Harry", she whispered over her shoulder. Ginny turned and walked slowly through the archway, and as soon as she was through, the stones reappeared, and both Harrys and Draco Malfoy found themselves staring at a blank, grey stone wall.

Harry was determined that Draco Malfoy should understand. He showed him Ron coming out of hiding, because he thought Ginny was pregnant. The discovery by Binns. And then the fateful trip up to the cave with Ron and his mother and the other Draco Malfoy. The first time he saw himself at roughly the age of sixteen, he walked all around himself, eyeing the other version critically.

"I didn't take up running, did I?"

"No. Thought I was daft for doing it."

"Huh."

Harry braced himself, looking away when his mother flew backwards to her death in the cave, feeling the rebel tear streak down his cheek. He looked up at Malfoy, who wore a stricken look on his face.

"She was going to kill Ron", he explained softly. Malfoy nodded, swallowing. As each successively scene swirled into existence around them, Malfoy became quieter and quieter; Harry wasn't sure, but he thought Malfoy might be breaking his own record for longest time without making a snide remark. At the trial, Malfoy was shocked when Harry accused his Inquisitor's own son of being a Death Eater, and even more shocked when the dementor was approaching Harry and his dad released the Patronus in the form of a flock of bats.

"All right Snape!" Malfoy said admiringly, a lopsided smile on his face. Harry didn't show him Azkaban, simply told him he went there.

"You — you went to *Azkaban*?" he breathed, incredulous. Harry nodded.

"But I broke out, the same way Sirius did, using my Animagus form."

"Why? I thought you were only given five years."

Harry drew his lips into a line. "My dad sent me a letter. Ginny was dead. And Jamie. And Simon was in hospital. Binns had found them and attacked them." Harry covered his eyes with his hand. "The next time you call me 'Perfect Potter', or some other annoying thing like that, just remember — my own life had to go to hell before I realized that I'd created a world that should never have been, before I finally acted to change it back." He looked at Malfoy again now. "And I never could have done it without you."

Malfoy turned, looked behind himself for a moment as though unsure whom Harry was addressing. "Me?"

As the scene changed again to Alicia Spinnet's lodge on her parents' estate, Harry explained how they went on the run, flying by night and walking by day, with some help from the Muggle-born witches. He had already shown him Lucius Malfoy giving his son the diary of Tom Riddle; now he explained that the plan was to get Riddle to emerge from the diary so that Harry could perform the *Tempus Bonae Voluntatis* spell with him again and go back to the night his father died and mother *should* have died.

"You agreed to sacrifice yourself. It was only because of you that I was able to put it all right again."

Malfoy looked at him in disbelief, as though Harry were imagining things. Soon the whirling fog deposited them in Hermione's London flat, paint drop cloths and ladders strewn about. The encounter with the cop who wanted to try out her Swedish on Draco; he was chuckling at his own antics, but wincing at the mock-Swedish accent. Then he saw his other self with Hermione up against the wall, his lips on her neck, his hands moving over her, and his jaw dropped. "You — you didn't show this to Weasley, did you?" he asked. Harry shook his head; Malfoy was ever mindful of self-preservation.

"Of course not. Plus, I was showing them the Pensieve at the same time. Hermione would hex me into the middle of the next century if she knew that — well, that this had happened. Even though it was a different life."

Malfoy moved closer to the two now, watching Hermione's face as she abandoned herself temporarily to the feelings resulting from Draco Malfoy kissing and touching her. Harry waited for a crass comment from Malfoy but received nothing more than a very soft, "Wow."

"Except", Harry cautioned him, "that wasn't really you."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Different life. Damn. Don't I wish I could hold this over Granger —"

"That's not what I mean. Look here. See his eyes?"

Draco Malfoy peered into his own eyes, shivering for a moment. "Yeah. What is that?"

"That's Riddle. He was already experimenting with taking you over. He was in control, not you. *He* was the one carrying on with Hermione."

The swirling greyness engulfed them once more, and Harry warned him, "What happens next — are you sure you want to see it?"

Malfoy frowned at him through the fog. "Why?"

"It's your dad dying."

Malfoy's eyes widened as their feet landed on the painfully green grass on the cliffs at Dover.

"We can skip it if you like."

Draco Malfoy looked around. "No. You — you saw your mum die again. And you didn't want her to die. Let me at least enjoy seeing this", he said, his voice hard. So Harry let him watch his father fly backwards off the cliff, and he watched his face, how he set his jaw, and something made

Harry shudder. Somehow, seeing Malfoy watch his father die with no emotions revealed was very eerie.

Finally, they were in the tent in Godric's Hollow, and the other Draco was explaining to the other Harry that it was his fault that the sea-basilisk had gone after Ginny. They saw the blond boy fade and slip into unconsciousness; they saw the other Harry meet Tom Riddle.

Harry saw that Malfoy was watching very closely when the other Harry was trying to hex Tom Riddle and failing.

"That's how you knew about it", he said softly.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. I learned about it the hard way."

Nonetheless, Malfoy was shocked when Harry set the diary on fire, causing Riddle to disappear. Harry looked at Malfoy, who was white as a ghost.

"Is it — is it *all* here?"

"What?"

Malfoy looked toward the Potter cottage, through the trees. "You know. When — when he tried to kill you —"

"Yeah. We can stay and see it, if you like. But — but I may not watch. I've seen it too many times now, you know?"

Malfoy nodded, and Harry would have found it very easy to believe that it was his friend from his other life; there was a sympathy in the eyes that wasn't normally there. Harry hung about in the trees while Malfoy went to the edge of the copse to watch. Harry heard the explosion, heard his dad die after telling his mother to flee with their child. He heard his mother offer her life for his, the sound of speeding death as her wish was granted, then the inhuman cry of Voldemort being ripped from his body.

He turned and walked toward where Draco was standing, his mouth open slightly, his eyes in what seemed a permanent stare, as though he would never blink again.

"That's enough, I think. Come on", Harry said, putting his hand on the other boy's elbow. He felt them rising up and out of the Pensieve, and then flipping over and landing on the floor of the dorm. When Draco Malfoy lifted his face, he looked just a bit traumatized.

"You all right?" Harry asked him uncertainly. Malfoy nodded.

"So that's how it happened", he whispered. He looked up at Harry's scar. "How you got the scar."

Harry swallowed. "She didn't just sacrifice herself for me; she did it for us all, even though she had no idea what would happen as a result. And you sacrificed yourself, as well."

Malfoy grimaced. "You keep saying that. You heard what he said. What I said. It was selfish. It was so he — I — wouldn't remember your sister." He paused, shaking his head. "I'd ask how the hell you got such a pretty sister, but I saw your mum at the seaside; I don't need to ask."

Harry decided not to be offended by this; instead he tried to joke about it. "Well, you weren't the only one who noticed her. Ron fancied her, but he wouldn't admit it. Although technically, Cho was his girlfriend, so he shouldn't have been admitting to fancying someone else..."

"So", Malfoy said slowly. "You and Ginny. In that life."

Harry braced himself; perhaps Malfoy was experiencing a bit of a delayed reaction. "Yeah, about that, Malfoy —"

But he nodded instead. "I — I think I understand now."

Harry frowned. "You do?"

Malfoy shrugged. "Well — Oh, never mind. What I mean is — We both loved her. And we've both lost her." He looked Harry in the eye. "You're right about that. I mean, about having it in common."

Harry nodded grimly. "You're not angry?" he ventured carefully.

Malfoy looked like he had to think about it. "I'm — I'm jealous. And enjoy that while you can — I'm never admitting it again. But —" he sighed. "It isn't like I can't identify. God! If I were sleeping all night with Ginny lying naked on top of me, and having no clothes on myself... Well, let's just say that the words 'self-control' would *not* be needed to describe what would be going on..."

He looked a little wistful then. "You mentioned that you two were in the showers. You wouldn't be interested in showing just a *little* of —"

"No," Harry said firmly. "Besides, you probably took a look at her in the showers plenty when you had the amulet. Personally, that was why I gave you the amulets — I started seeing the two of you in the greenhouses after she'd received her O.W.L. results. I didn't know about Sprout interrupting you at that time, and I couldn't stomach the idea of seeing the two of you together whenever I touched it, so I knew I had to get rid of it."

Malfoy frowned, not understanding. "You, Harry, are lacking in the necessary curiosity to be a bonafide voyeur. Pity, with that Invisibility Cloak and all." He smiled at Draco Malfoy, who looked unnerved by this,

looking behind himself in a panic suddenly. "What?" he demanded. "What's going on now? Why do you look like that?"

Harry grinned more broadly. "You just called me Harry."

The other boy looked relieved when he said this. "Oh, is that all? Well, it isn't as though I haven't done before. And I was seeing myself call you that for — what? The last couple of hours..." He checked his watch. "The last six hours!" he exclaimed. "Bloody hell! We missed lunch!"

Harry shrugged. "It took a while to show you everything. There was all that stuff from our early childhoods —"

"I know, I know. I don't want to take another six hours to go over it." He put his hand on his stomach and Harry actually heard it growl from about six feet away. "I'm bloody starving, and dinner won't be for a couple of hours..."

Harry grinned. "Haven't you ever nicked food from the kitchens?"

Draco Malfoy raised one eyebrow. "And it's Slytherins people are told to watch out for. Meanwhile, the Gryffindors are all involved in grand larceny..."

Harry laughed. "I hardly think getting some pumpkin juice and a snack from the kitchens is 'grand larceny'. I'll bet Dobby could dig up some eclairs for us..."

Malfoy made a face. "Dobby! I forgot about him. He was the worst elf we ever had! Completely insubordinate!"

"He was miserable, and wanted to be free", Harry said defensively. "Anyway — I wanted to do *something* to get back at your dad, after he nearly got Ginny killed and practically shut down the school." Harry grinned more broadly. "He was definitely *not* as happy about losing Dobby as you are."

Malfoy guffawed. "I'll bet. He was always complaining that it was getting virtually impossible to find a house-elf auction, to get more domestic help. He suspected that some soft-hearted witches and wizards were freeing their elves and depleting the market. Hard to tell though — anyone who freed an elf would never admit it."

"Mr. Crouch did. He dismissed Winky in front of plenty of witnesses. Of course, I think that was the point. He didn't want to be associated with her if he could help it. As far as anyone there knew, she was the one who'd fired the Dark Mark into the sky."

Malfoy shook his head. "Oh, sure. An *elf*. That's really likely", he drawled, rolling his eyes. "I hope to hell they get some half-decent people applying to be Aurors soon. Right now there are some real idiots on the job."

"Katie's going to be an Auror. Her training should be over soon, in fact."

He shrugged. "I reckon Katie will do all right. If she keeps her temper. She's probably one of the better ones."

They were silent for a minute, then Draco Malfoy looked up hopefully. "At any rate, you mentioned eclairs. Care to lead the way to the kitchens?"

Harry pulled out the Invisibility Cloak, smiling.

"Don't forget this", he said, draping it over Draco.

Draco, he thought. It was good to call him that again. *He knows now. He knows that he's capable of great things, that he didn't just act out of self-interest, that he saved the world, really.* Harry looked at the place where Draco had been moments before. A disembodied voice floated toward him, making him feel nostalgic for his other life. He also felt like perhaps a new, better chapter of this life was beginning.

"Lead on, Harry", Draco whispered; Harry could hear the smile in his voice. "Take me to your eclairs."

* * *

After they were well fed by the elves — Dobby avoiding Draco Malfoy the entire time — they went to the Quidditch pitch to practice catching the Snitch. They took turns releasing it, then each went to the goals at the opposite ends of the pitch before starting to look for it. Harry caught it three times to Draco's one time, but he noted that Draco was remarkably cheerful despite this. (Harry had pretended not to see the Snitch the one time Draco caught it; he'd been starting to get worried.) When they returned to the castle, wind-blown and hungry yet again, they ran into Ron and Ginny as they were going into the Great Hall for dinner. The two Weasleys stopped short when they saw Harry and Draco entering the castle together, carrying their brooms, obviously having been out for some time, as they were quite ruddy-faced.

Ron bristled. "What's going on with you two, then?"

Harry halted, at a loss for words. He remembered Draco becoming a bit hostile when he'd started trying to befriend Ron in his other life; now

the tables were turned and Ron was looking like he was at risk to lose his best friend to one of the people he hated most in the world.

"Erm", Draco Malfoy said, "just a little one-on-one Seeker practice. I asked him how he did a couple of the maneuvers I saw him execute in the Hufflepuff match last month."

Ron looked like Harry was an abject traitor. "And you *showed* him?" Ron said, incredulous. "I asked you to captain the team for me while I was away — not give away all of the Gryffindor secrets to the enemy."

It was Draco's turn to bristle now. "Just because I'm a Slytherin — "

"Oh, shut up, Malfoy. All the other houses are the enemy when it comes to the Quidditch Cup. I'd say the same if Harry started coaching Justin in Seeking, or that little Ravenclaw boy who's taking over for Cho now. What were you thinking, Harry?"

Harry grimaced "I was getting in some practice myself. We should probably step up the team practices; soon it'll be pretty cold, and when the match against Ravenclaw comes in February it'll be a miracle if we can keep our hands on our brooms without them falling off."

Ron continued to look at them suspiciously. Then Harry saw that Ginny was peering into the Great Hall nervously, looking like she did *not* want to enter.

"What's wrong, Ginny?"

She turned to him, biting her lip. "Oh, I, um — maybe I'll just skip dinner..."

She whipped around abruptly and started climbing the marble steps. "What was that all about?" Harry asked Ron, who rolled his eyes.

"Oh, Hermione's ridiculous ploy to get my attention. She thinks I'll be jealous of *Neville* for some reason", he explained, looking sideways at Draco Malfoy, clearly mocking him.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, baffled.

"It's not fair to Neville, either. She's leading him on. I mean, do you remember back when he asked her to the Yule Ball? Took some nuts to do that; he wasn't to know that Krum had beaten him to her. Well, he's always had a little thing for her, let's face it. Never a chance in hell that she'd return it, of course. And now that she's evidently decided that *you* won't cooperate in making me jealous", he said to Harry, "she's decided to rope poor Neville into this. And she's stolen him from Ginny while she's at it." He shook his head. "Don't know what she's thinking. I mean — it's all so

obvious. Why she thinks this is doing anything other than making matters worse is beyond me. Besides which, I'm not about to change my mind for any reason, so she should just quit trying."

Draco Malfoy stared into the Great Hall, and Harry saw where he was looking; Hermione and Neville were sitting very close together at the Gryffindor table, and she was *feeding* him. Harry thought he was going to spew.

"Are you telling me that that prat just up and left Ginny?" Draco said in disbelief. He turned toward the Gryffindor table, scowling. "He will not know what hit him —" he growled under his breath, pushing up the sleeves of his robe. Harry put out his hand to stop him.

"Are you mad? You already lost twenty-five points for Slytherin because of your so-called duel in the corridor on Thursday. And so did Neville lose twenty-five for Gryffindor. Besides — I thought you didn't want them together."

"Yes, but *he's* supposed to *want* them to be together. How can that little —" Harry didn't comment on the fact that Neville was taller than Draco now — "incompetent pillock just dump Ginny, even if he *has* been panting after Granger for years? Even Weasley here can tell Granger doesn't really mean it. Does Longbottom actually believe she's going to let him shag her? Is he really that gullible? And even if he is — I still don't think that's an excuse to hurt Ginny. *That* is completely unforgivable —"

Ron looked tired; he walked to Draco Malfoy and put his hand out on the smaller boy's chest, holding him in place so he couldn't get around Ron to enter the Great Hall. Draco struggled against him. Ron seemed to expend absolutely no effort at all in preventing him from going anywhere.

"As chivalrous as your attitude toward my sister is, Malfoy, I think you should stay out of this. I'll get some dinner and take some food up to Ginny, see if she wants to talk about it. After all, I reckon she's not having a very good time of it right now. First she finds out Mariah — who she thought was a friend — is being far too friendly with *you*, and now Hermione's stupid stunt means another so-called friend is basically stabbing her in the back. She'd probably be more likely to want to see me, as I'm one of the few people who hasn't betrayed her in recent memory..."

Harry noticed that Ron's eyes slid sideways and met his; he flushed guiltily. Ron turned from them and entered the Great Hall. Harry started to follow him, but Draco pulled him back into the entrance hall.

"So", he said, his arms crossed. "Is this why you were so anxious to recruit me as a friend? You knew this was coming, didn't you? And now Ginny's all alone, and needing comforting..."

Harry shook his head. "I didn't know about this at all. I would have told Hermione she was mad if I *had* known. And anyway, Ginny doesn't want comforting from me."

Draco looked skeptical. "I don't know. Granger *is* still one of your best friends. Why should I believe this is a complete surprise to you?"

"Because I've given you my word", Harry said stiffly, his jaw set stubbornly. The two glared at each other for a minute, and suddenly Harry had a hard time remembering that they'd actually been behaving like good friends earlier. "You didn't react this badly to finding out about — about our spending the night together in the changing rooms. Why are you reacting this way now?"

Draco shrugged. "That was in the past. And in this life, it didn't technically happen. Ginny doesn't know anything about it. She has no memory of being with you. It's not the same as you *actually* being with her in this life."

Harry crossed his arms. "So — what if I were wrong? What if —" his voice caught with hope. "What if there *were* some chance of Ginny ever forgiving me. What if she did decide to make a go of it? What would you do? A friend — and your ex-girlfriend."

Draco Malfoy looked at him very levelly for a moment, then away. He swallowed, then looked at Harry again, unblinking.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, 'I don't know?'"

Malfoy scowled. "What I said. *I don't know*. I'm being perfectly honest, Potter", Harry winced; going back to last names wasn't a good sign; "I'm not claiming that I won't touch you or anything. In fact, I don't feel like I can be held responsible for my actions if that ever happens..."

Harry looked up at the marble steps where Ginny had gone, then turned to enter the Great Hall with Draco Malfoy — who might or might not actually have been his friend. "Don't worry", he sighed. "I doubt it's anything we'll ever have to worry about. Besides, if we're friends — well, she's not exactly thrilled about you doing all that cheating on her. I doubt she'd want to have anything to do with me if the two of us are friendly..."

That made the Slytherin brighten up considerably. "Good point, good point. Well *old mate*, shall we have some dinner?" he said grinning, before striding happily into the Great Hall and heading for his house table.

* * *

Harry and Hermione waited outside the dungeon cell while Sirius unlocked the heavy door. When it opened, Ron was revealed, crouched in the corner, his head in his hands. He was sweating and shaking as though he had a fever. Hermione choked on her cry and dashed across the room to him, holding his head in her hands. Harry turned to look grimly at Sirius, who nodded and closed the door again, shutting the three of them in for the night. Harry looked at the high barred window; from here, it already seemed to be dark out, but Harry knew that was just because the window faced the east. Ron looked very bad; despite the fact that he was attempting to go about clean-shaven now, he had what looked like a full beard and the backs of his hands were covered in dense red hair. The red light was in his eyes. Harry went to Hermione.

"Come on. We don't have much time. We should transfigure ourselves. He's had all the potion he's supposed to; it should actually be a pretty peaceful night."

Harry knew that he would sleep well; he hadn't slept at all the night before, working on a Potions essay. He was much more anxious about Potions than he used to be; somehow, he felt that if he earned a less-than-perfect mark from Snape, he was letting his stepfather down. He had labored the entire night through until he thought it was perfect — and he still worried about it right up to the moment he handed in his parchment — and right after, as well.

Ron had spent the day before in the cell; Harry had taken him down and locked him in securely. Ron was giving him funny looks all the way down, and he reckoned that if he had to, he could transfigure himself into a golden griffin and hold Ron off that way. The idea of having to fend off passes from Ron was very strange, but Ron was able to control himself enough to make that unnecessary. And it was still about twenty-four hours before the full moon; as the rise of the full moon drew nearer, the mania became worse. It wasn't as bad as it could get yet. Before he'd left him, Harry had asked whether he was all right. Ron had looked at him as though he were mad.

"Of course I'm not all right! I'm — I'd shag bloody anything right now!" Harry swallowed, sincerely hoping he didn't mean that. He looked down at his hands, sitting in the corner where he and Hermione would find him the next evening, just before moonrise. "And what's worse is — I know what it's like *not* to feel this way at this time now. I mean, even though I hurt her so badly — Parvati *did* make me feel better. Afterward — I was so incredibly calm. It was weird. I thought maybe I'd killed us both and we were in heaven. Pretty strange, huh?" He sighed. "This will have to do. Make sure you lock the door good, Harry."

Harry nodded to his best friend and slammed the door shut, effectively protecting all of the residents of Hogwarts Castle from the advances of a very frustrated werewolf.

Hermione put her hand on Ron's cheek and then stood and walked to Harry. They both changed into their animal forms in the blink of an eye. Ron smiled and shook his head. "Amazing, you two are. I can't believe — believe you still want to be with me after — after —"

Harry loped over to Ron and pushed at his foot with his large moist nose, trying to tell him to shut up, of course they wanted to be with him. Even though Hermione was frustrated with him, she was appalled by the idea that they wouldn't keep Ron company now that he wasn't in St. Mungo's any more.

"Of course we'll be there!" she'd said, shocked when Ron had suggested that neither of them might want to be down in the cell with him.

It had been a strange week; Hermione had been going into a corner of the common room with Neville quite a lot. They occupied a single armchair turned to the corner, and all that could be heard from that vicinity when they were there were sighs and kissing noises. Ginny's face had been like a thundercloud for days, Harry had been mortally embarrassed and tried to leave the room every time it happened, and others simply pretended, rather red-faced, that it wasn't happening at all. He'd heard Ruth say about her and Tony, rather archly, "You don't see *us* behaving like that..." *If I actually think about it, my brain may self-destruct*, Harry decided. There was something so very not-right about it.

And in spite of his stating right up-front that he was convinced Hermione was just doing it to get to him, Ron was showing progressive signs of being affected by their behavior anyway. Two days before the full moon Harry had a number of books spread out on a table near Neville and

Hermione's favorite corner when they came into the room and headed right for their lair. Groaning, Harry started to gather up his many books, rather irritated that he had to lug them all into the library or his dorm. He'd just gotten everything set up to get his homework done...

Ron came down from the dorm and saw what Harry was doing; he walked over to him, frowning. "What's with you? When I went upstairs, you were just arranging all this stuff. Now you're packing up?"

Harry motioned to the corner with his head. Ron's mouth was open slightly as he listened (and, Harry realized, he could probably hear a lot more than most people). Ron set his jaw stubbornly and glared at the back of the chair. "Oh. I see."

Harry tried to get his attention, and Ron finally looked like he was awake. "Help me carry this stuff?" Ron nodded and they had soon transported the lot of it back up to the dorm, where Harry spread it out on his trunk and sat on the floor nearby, scribbling notes on his parchment and feeling vaguely like it was Hermione and Neville who should have to go elsewhere, not *him*. Ron sat on his bed to keep him company; Harry was doing extensive research about Apparition for Sirius' class, as he was giving them a long written test and requiring them to write a paper before allowing them to register to take their tests with the Ministry. Since Ron wasn't taking Apparition, he didn't have to worry about this particular assignment.

At one point Harry looked up to see Ron glaring at Neville's bed.

"I thought you knew she was just trying to get you wound up, Ron. Thought it wasn't getting to you."

"It's not", Ron immediately responded. Harry could tell he was lying without being a werewolf and being able to sense a change in the blood vessels around the eyes. It was eating at him as it wouldn't have if she'd been with Harry — maybe. If he and Hermione had actually taken Ron seriously and gotten back together, he might be every bit as bothered. Harry was reconsidering his original assessment that her idea to do this was mad. There seemed indeed to be method in it.

Soon after he and Hermione changed into their Animagus forms, Ron started grunting, then groaning. Harry winced during Ron's change; he could *hear* his bones being wrenched and twisted out of shape, and when he saw Ron's familiar long nose elongate even further and become the

wolf's snout, he swallowed nervously, always prepared for the Wolfsbane Potion to fail to work its magic.

He needn't have worried; once transformed, Ron stretched, then curled up and relaxed on the cell floor, still breathing shallowly from the pain and exertion of the change. Hermione lowered herself onto the floor next to him, putting her head on one of his paws. Harry hunkered down on his other side and rested his chin on his own front paws, already feeling his eyes start to close because of his lack of sleep...

* * *

Harry wasn't sure what the time was when he awoke; a bright light was shining in the high barred window of the cell and he heard Ron and Hermione speaking softly. He was lying on his side, too exhausted to move. They were looking human again, about six feet away. But the truly amazing thing was that they were kissing; Ron had pulled Hermione on top of him and he was holding her head with his fingers laced in her short curls. When Hermione broke the kiss and moved her lips down to his throat, he moaned lightly and asked her, "What's this potion again?"

"Aegisthos Potion. It creates a kind of shield, so I can't be injured. It only lasts a little while, but that's all it *has* to last, right?"

He raised his eyebrows and looked at her. "Well, give me *some* credit, Hermione..."

She laughed. "That's not what I meant... I've been reading and reading, searching for something I can take for *months*. It's not purely frivolous research. This potion is often used by Aurors when they know they're going into a possibly volatile situation, and it can be useful for the N.E.W.T.s, too. It's for battle, frankly."

"So — are you equating *this* with doing battle?"

"It's certainly been a battle to convince you I'm not going anywhere..."

He groaned. "I can't believe I was bloody jealous of Neville, of all people! I knew from the start what you were doing..."

She nodded and kissed his neck. "I knew you knew. I also knew that wouldn't necessarily negate its effectiveness. Worked, didn't it?" She grinned at him and suddenly he flipped her over. Harry winced, waiting for her head to come into contact with the hard stone floor, but it actually seemed to give a little under their combined weight.

"Mmm... such a comfy floor..." Ron leaned down to kiss her neck now, saying between kisses, "Are you glorying in being such a clever witch

again?" Harry understood now: she'd put a Cushioning Charm on the floor. So, if she couldn't hurt herself on the floor, and Ron couldn't hurt her because of the shield potion...

He was appalled as they began kissing again; although they were fully clothed, they moved like they weren't, touching each other through their clothes and kissing with abandon. Harry decided he had pretended to be asleep long enough. He changed to his human form and sat up suddenly.

"If you two care anything about me, *please* stop now and wait for me to get out of here before doing anything else..." They looked up with a start, having evidently forgotten he was there. He saw this and grimaced. "What did you *think* I was, a lion-skin rug?"

Ron chuckled, rolling off Hermione. He pulled her to him and enfolded her in his arms, where she gladly crept, a smile curling at the corners of her mouth. "Sorry, Harry", Ron said. "And — I'm sorry I've been such a prat about — well, everything."

Harry raised his eyebrows and nodded. "That about covers it. Everything." Then he grinned. "So — does this mean —"

Hermione looked up adoringly at Ron, who'd already shaved with his wand. "We've been talking since dawn. I told him I'd been doing my research, that I have a shield potion —" she held up a small vial she'd taken from her pocket; "— that can be taken internally. And I thought that softening everything around us with cushioning charms should take care of the rest of the problems. Plus there's the timing. Nothing during the week before the full moon, of course."

Harry felt himself flush. He'd slept with Hermione, but talking about her plans to do the same with Ron didn't exactly make him feel comfortable. "Erm", he said awkwardly; "Sirius should be here any minute. I think I'll — I'll tell him you'll be coming along shortly." He stopped; he could have bitten his tongue for his choice of words. Ron and Hermione were grinning cheekily at each other. He went on. "Then you can — put an internal locking charm on the door if you like, so you can get out again..." He felt himself getting progressively redder.

Sure enough, a moment later, he heard Sirius start to open the door. Harry leapt to his feet and was squeezing out the opening as soon as it was large enough to admit him. Once in the corridor, Harry was appalled to see that Snape was also there.

"Erm, good morning", he said to them both, his voice squeaking a little. Sirius frowned at his godson.

"Harry, why on earth are you bright red?" he wanted to know. Harry caught Snape's eye and thought he saw a merry twinkle there and an upward turn to one corner of his mouth.

"I take it Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger are still in the cell?"

"Um — yeah. They are. They'll come up for breakfast soon. They're just, erm, talking..." He knew he didn't sound convincing.

Sirius had caught on now, and Harry could see that he was trying very hard not to laugh as he was closing the cell door. "Oh, is that what they're calling it now?"

As they walked toward the stairs to the entrance hall, Snape, walking in his characteristic pose with his hands behind his back, said, "So, I take it Miss Granger managed to make the Aegisthos Potion?"

Harry stopped dead in his tracks. "You *know*? And you helped?"

"Miss Dougherty asked me for advice, actually. She's rather fond of Miss Granger and it goes without saying that she's fond of her brother", he said stiffly. Harry nodded; that made sense. Hermione and Maggie had become good friends. It was a little strange to him that he was walking with two teachers who *knew* what Ron and Hermione were most likely doing back in the cell where they'd spent the night. But then, they were both of age, and Hermione was the Head Girl, and they both knew that she'd taken certain precautions...

Harry had to stop thinking about it or go mad. He left Snape and Sirius and went up to the prefects' bathroom, even though he hadn't gone running, and reveled in the hot water, just standing, letting it strike him harshly as he stood under the showerhead. Draco and Tony came in when he was toweling off.

"Oh, good morning, Harry", Tony said cheerfully. "Where were you? And Hermione?" He didn't ask about Ron, knowing full well that there was a full moon the night before. But it wasn't common knowledge that Hermione and Harry stayed with Ron, as it wasn't known that they were Animagi.

Harry looked at Draco, then away. "Sleeping in", he said, which wasn't completely untrue. Draco Malfoy stood looking at him suspiciously. When Tony went to the showers, Draco still hadn't undressed for his bath. He didn't take his gaze from Harry.

"All right, Harry. Out with it. What's up? Perugia can't hear anything with the shower going. If we're going to be friends —"

Harry tried to shrug nonchalantly. "It's nothing really. Well, that's not strictly true. It's not nothing to them..."

Draco's eyebrows flew up. "Them? Them who?"

Harry swallowed, trying to appear to be very concerned about drying between his toes. "Ron and Hermione."

"You mean — no. Weasel and Granger are — they're finally —"

"Sssh! I shouldn't have said anything. It's none of your business..."

Draco frowned. "Granger wants to wind up in the hospital wing that badly?"

"No; she has a shield potion she's taken so she can't be hurt, and even if she tripped or something, she's put cushioning charms all over the place..."

Draco whistled. "I have to admit. She can be clever..." Harry remembered her putting the cushioning charm on the bathroom floor when they met there in the middle of the night... His face must have shown something; Draco Malfoy was frowning again. "What's really wrong, Harry?"

He looked up. What was wrong? That was a good question. He'd been trying to talk sense into Ron for months where Hermione was concerned...

"She was your first, wasn't she?" Draco said now, rather quietly. Harry nodded.

"But that's not it. I reckon — this just changes things. They're really together now. I guess — I know how he felt now. When Hermione and I were able to be open about the two of us. In some ways it's been rather nice, the last few months, the three of us being friends again in the old way. I reckon I'll need to check all the time now to see whether they have plans together, that sort of thing." He rubbed his feet dry with a vengeance, making the bright pink skin feel like it was burning from the friction.

Draco had turned back to his bath preparations now, shaking his head. "I always knew that would be trouble. Two boys and a girl."

"It worked fine for our first four years. Well, except for the Yule Ball. And Viktor Krum. But that wasn't because we were two boys and a girl."

"True. That was because Weasley was a great ponce."

Draco slid into the water as Harry finished dressing. "See you in Charms", Harry said, leaving.

"Harry", Draco said suddenly.

"Yeah?"

"If you — if they leave you in the lurch much —"

Harry gave him a half smile. "Right. I do have another friend."

"Just remember that."

"After all, I don't hold any grudges against Neville..."

Draco Malfoy made a wave of water splash at him, very nearly reaching the doorway. "You prat!" he laughed. Harry also laughed while leaving. When he was standing in the corridor, his hand still on the knob, he shook his head in wonder. *Draco Malfoy, cheering me up.* He went back to Gryffindor Tower for fresh clothes, shaking his head still, glad that in addition to Ron and Hermione, he did indeed have another friend he could rely upon.

* * *

The following night, he didn't go into the cell with Ron and Hermione for the night. Sirius looked surprised, but Harry said, "I told them I wasn't coming. I thought — they could use some privacy."

When they'd locked the door, Sirius patted Harry on the shoulder. "You're a good friend, Harry. You're right; they need some privacy. Are you going back up to your dorm? It's early still, since it's almost the solstice. Are you coming up to dinner?"

"Yeah. I didn't eat early, like they did, since I wasn't planning on staying down here tonight."

After dinner, Harry went up to the staff wing with Sirius and they talked for a while and played some chess. Sirius had a wizarding wireless and they listened to some music and news. It was a very pleasant evening, and Harry wondered what his life might have been like if he'd gone to live with Sirius instead of the Dursleys. As he was leaving, he had the sudden urge to ask his godfather something.

"Sirius, when my mum and dad got together, you know, as a couple, was it — was it weird for you? Did it change everything?"

Sirius regarded Harry seriously. "Yeah, a bit. And I still rather fancied Lily, as well", he admitted bashfully. Harry was surprised.

"So that must have been even stranger than this is for me. I mean, Hermione's my old girlfriend, but I don't feel jealous of his having *her*. It's more — what they have together. And that they each have someone. And that they're caught up in that now —"

"— and may not always have time for you. Yes, it was inevitable, perhaps. You'll adjust. You'll be just fine, Harry. And I'm here to talk any time."

Harry nodded. "Thanks. G'night, Sirius."

He smiled gently at the young man who looked so like his former best friend. "Good night, Harry."

* * *

The morning after the third night of the full moon it was Sunday, and most people dragged themselves into the Great Hall for breakfast rather late. Harry was surprised to see Ron and Hermione there already, eating peacefully beside each other. *Like an old married couple*, Harry couldn't help thinking, with a small smile. He was getting more used to the idea. He noticed that Neville was sitting farther down the table eating some toast and talking to Seamus and Dean as though his private life hadn't recently been turned upside down; Hermione must have let him down easy, he assumed. For someone who seemed to have been very attached to Hermione, he was evidently taking it quite well. Ginny was nowhere in sight. Harry sat opposite his best friends, who smiled sunnily at him.

"Good morning, Harry!" Hermione practically sang. Harry ladled some porridge into a bowl.

"Morning Ron, Hermione. You *do* look like you've had a good morning", he couldn't help adding impishly. Ron's hair was standing on end and he had a very silly grin on his face.

But Hermione was suddenly frowning at him. "Please, Harry! A little discretion if you will", she said primly. Harry laughed while he poured himself some juice.

"Discretion, she says! Snape knows, Sirius knows, Maggie knows... discretion! I reckon Dumbledore knows. He knows everything around here, doesn't he?"

Hermione turned deep red. "Oh, *god*, Harry. Don't say that. I could never look him in the face again..."

Ron met Harry's eye now and they both laughed. Just then they were all distracted by the owl post; as each bird of prey swooped over the tables, it deposited a delivery with the right person before moving off and up to the clerestory windows again. Harry had a small envelope drop into his hands, surprised to see that it was from his uncle. He'd written to his aunt about how she was doing, whether she was behaving and avoiding

doing magic, that sort of thing. He'd received no response, so he tried again, reminding her to tell the owl to wait for a response. On the third go, he decided to try writing to his uncle to find out whether Aunt Petunia was all right, and he also asked Hedwig to stay and wait to bring back a reply.

"It looks like Uncle Vernon is writing me back", he said to Ron and Hermione. He opened the reply now. It was on Grunnings stationery, typed neatly, evidently using the computer and printer at his uncle's office. There was no salutation.

How the hell should I know how your aunt is? Isn't she with you at that place you call a school? I should have shot that damn bird of yours, but I wanted her to bring this back to you so you can know exactly how completely you have ruined my life, you bastard. Thanks to you, Dudley is dead. If you hadn't helped him lose weight, he never would have had a girlfriend to commit suicide over. Now my wife has left me, gallivanting off to be a witch. Even Mrs. Figg turns out to be as abnormal as you are. And to top it all off, our MP was just arrested for murder. I've half a mind to emigrate. To hell with you and all of your kind! If I ever see you again it will be too soon!

Vernon Dursley

"What's it say?" Hermione wanted to know.

"Erm, here", he said, not feeling up to adequately communicating the gist of his uncle's letter. So, he wondered. *If Aunt Petunia isn't back home in Surrey, where is she?*

Hermione's eyes went wide as she read. Harry swallowed some porridge and said, "I know! Evidently she didn't go back home to Sur —"

"That's not it, Harry! I mean — yes, we need to work out what's happened to your aunt. It's this part here about the MP committing murder!"

Harry shrugged. "So? There are always government scandals. He probably thought his girlfriend was going to tell his wife about them or talk to a sleazy reporter. It wouldn't be the first time there was a scandal at Whitehall because of —"

"No, Harry! God, don't you get it? Your MP — or rather, your uncle's MP is the one for Mole Valley!"

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, I know. What are you getting at? Surrey just about always elects a passell of Conservatives, except for Guildford, which might as well be somewhere else. Those Tories always seem to have the most scandals —"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Harry!" she said, trying to get his attention. "We *know* the MP for Mole Valley, your uncle's home district, and until this summer, yours as well."

"What d'you mean, we *know* him?"

She looked wild now. "It's Mr. Spinnet, Alicia's dad!"

Harry was shocked. "No, it's not! He's from Northamptonshire!"

Hermione looked like she was losing patience with him now. "That's where he *lives*, but he represents Mole Valley. *You* know, where Little Whinging is. There's no way he'd ever get elected in most of Northamptonshire. They're as Labour as Surrey is Tory. Didn't you pay any attention when he was whinging about the MP for Kettering being such a bleeding heart? God, it was all I could do to bite my tongue all that week. I just started playing the cello very loudly every time he started in again. Mum and Dad have sent me some more papers. Let me see what we have here..."

Harry and Ron helped her open her parcel of Muggle newspapers, spreading them out on the table between them.

"Here we go!" Hermione said triumphantly. "Front page of the *Times*." Harry could see, even reading upside down, that the oversized headline said "Malice at the Palace." She tapped it. "As in 'malice aforethought'. It's a bit overused, but for once it might be appropriate, instead of just referring to members of the royal family squabbling with each other." She skimmed down the column, frowning, then looked up at Ron and Harry. "It isn't good at all. He didn't kill just anyone — he shot the majority whip at point-blank range with a thirty-eight caliber pistol. There was a witness, and he tried to shoot him too, but he only got him in the arm and he's recovering. He'll be able to testify against Mr. Spinnet in court."

Harry couldn't believe it; Hermione handed him the *Times* while she picked up another paper to peruse. Ron was looking at one from Hermione's home, in Greenwich. "Uh-oh", he said. "Here's something else. Roger Davies has been missing since the day of the murder and attempted

murder, and Scotland Yard is questioning Spinnet about that, too. Something about — wanting to know what he's done with the body", he said, swallowing, looking up at Harry and Hermione. "They're speculating that Roger, who was his clerk, found out something about his plans to kill the whip and the other man — oh, evidently the other bloke was in line to become the whip if anything happened to the first bloke — and the police think Spinnet killed his own son-in-law so he wouldn't be able to stop him."

The three of them looked at each other in awe. *They'd stayed in the house of a murderer! A politician who was also a murderer!*

Harry had a sudden thought. "Alicia. Oh, god, what does it say about her? Roger's her husband and he's missing, her dad's in prison, accused of murder —"

Ron started to peruse the Greenwich paper and Harry began combing through the *Times*, but suddenly, Hermione said, "Alicia's right here."

"Right where?" Harry said, looking up at her. "What have you got there, Manchester? Is that the *Guardian*?"

"No, not right here in the paper. Right here — at Hogwarts." She nodded toward the doorway of the Great Hall, where Alicia Spinnet — or Alicia Davies, perhaps — was standing uncertainly. Harry immediately stood and strode toward her; when he reached her, he pulled her away from the doorway to the Great Hall. She immediately threw her arms around him and starting weeping on him uncontrollably. He held her and patted her back as she convulsed with sobs, and when she was finally a little calmer, she looked up at him, saying, "Oh, Harry! You must be wondering what all this is about —"

"No, I know. Hermione got a load of papers from her parents. God! Are you all right? How's your mum?"

She shook her head. "You — you know how you said I could come to you, Harry? If I needed help?"

Harry opened his mouth, then shut it. What on earth could *he* do, up in Scotland at Hogwarts, while her husband was missing and presumed dead and her dad was locked up, awaiting trial for a murder and attempted murder? He looked at her levelly, knowing that this wasn't the time to bring up how inappropriate it would be for him to get involved in Muggle politics.

"I'll do whatever I can, Alicia", he said, feeling that this would be a safe response. *Which won't be much*, he thought ruefully. Oh, god; she needed someone who could really *help* her. He thought for a moment — maybe Sirius?

"We could — we could talk to Sirius. He's only teaching part time and he goes out into the Muggle world frequently..."

She nodded. "You mean Sirius Black? I keep forgetting that he's been cleared..." she mused. Finally, she nodded. "That sounds good." She looked more collected now, more like the Head Girl from his fifth year. "I couldn't trust anyone in Scotland Yard, you see. Since I'm a witch and —"

Harry frowned. "But surely you wouldn't have to tell them that. Or even tell them that Roger's a wizard." He was painfully aware that it was an effort to use the present tense, instead of past tense, when talking about Roger.

"That's not the problem. The reason I need your help, Harry, is — my father's been framed."

She looked at him pleadingly, and Harry tried to keep his face sympathetic, but it was difficult; didn't *everyone* on trial for murder claim that he was framed? "But who —"

"A wizard", she said resolutely, her chin lifted defiantly. "My father has been framed by a wizard."

Fiefs

Harry gave the password to the gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledore's office. He'd decided that rather than just going to Sirius, it would be best to take the problem directly to the headmaster. After all, Alicia had been his Head Girl just two years earlier, and Roger had been Head Boy. As they went up the spiraling stairs, Harry glanced at her out of the corner of his eye; her usually-neat blonde hair was rather windblown from her having rushed to the castle from the village, and her vivid blue eyes looked bloodshot, as though she hadn't slept since her father was arrested. Perhaps she hadn't. Harry was starting to think he should have asked Hermione to come along, but after she and Ron had stumbled into the entrance hall to greet Alicia, Hermione had suggested that she and Ron comb through the newspapers some more to find out as much as possible. He'd asked her to send Sirius up to the headmaster's office in about an hour. He could talk to Hermione and Ron later, to tell them what he'd learned from Alicia herself.

Harry knocked on the heavy oaken door and heard the familiar voice say, "Come." They entered to find Dumbledore sitting at his desk, the former headmasters and headmistresses dozing lightly in their frames. Fawkes was sitting on his perch near one of the windows, preening. The headmaster appeared to be looking over the patrol schedule, as revised by Hermione, and seemed surprised to see Harry enter with Alicia.

"Harry! What can I do for you?" He clapped his hands together and smiled.

"Well, Professor, we have a bit of a problem..."

Dumbledore half-stood and waved his hands at the chairs before his desk. "Sit, Harry, sit. And you too, my dear." As Harry and Alicia sat, he also seated himself again and put his hands together in a steeple. Harry turned to look at Alicia, whom he was quite certain had also been crying on the way to the castle, although her eyes were dry now.

"Thank you for seeing us, Professor", she said with a catch in her throat. "Before my wedding, in August, Harry said that if I ever needed any help..."

"Of course, of course, my dear!" he said enthusiastically, making Harry stare. "But, er, perhaps you should begin from the beginning. I must ask you, however, to excuse me momentarily", he said abruptly, jolting Harry. "I shall return shortly."

He rose and opened the door to his private chambers, where Harry and Hermione had been listening to him talking to McGonagall in a weakened state. He certainly appeared to be in good health again. Harry had almost commented upon this when he remembered that he and Hermione weren't supposed to know about — whatever he'd been doing that had McGonagall so concerned. Dumbledore closed the door to the other room behind him when he left, then reappeared very quickly, not bothering to close the door again before sitting at his desk and clapping his hands together once. "So! You were going to start from the beginning, *Alicia*?"

Harry wondered why he wasn't asking after her. Perhaps because she was so obviously in distress, he thought. To exchange pleasant, "*So how are you?*" banalities wouldn't be very good form just now.

Alicia swallowed before beginning. "It all began, really, in our seventh year. Well, it didn't begin for me. Not exactly. It began for Roger. He received a recruitment letter..."

Harry gasped, but Dumbledore frowned. "Recruitment letter?"

It was Harry's turn to frown now. "Like I did, remember? A Death Eater recruitment letter. I told you I *thought* Roger might have received one also. Sir", he added, remembering to be deferential. Perhaps Dumbledore's memory was affected by whatever he had been doing that made him so weak, Harry thought. It seemed that McGonagall had been successful in convincing him to stop it, whatever it was. "Well, Per — I mean, *another person* received a letter about the same time", Harry said, very nearly saying Percy Weasley's name and stopping himself. "But that person didn't have to turn up, because after Lucius Malfoy went to prison it was all a moot point, as he hadn't shared with Voldemort the names of the people he was attempting to recruit, apart from mine..." He noticed that, to her credit, Alicia didn't flinch at the name, although that might have been because she was Muggle-born and didn't grow up in the wizarding world.

Alicia sighed. "Roger didn't know that. He said he'd heard about a wizard and witch who'd recently left school — Marcus Flint and Penelope Clearwater — and there were whispers that their deaths and the deaths of

their family members had occurred because they had been recruited also and had refused. Roger was worried about his family's safety. So, even though Lucius Malfoy went to prison —" She practically choked on the name; "— Roger didn't assume that his family would be safe. He wrote a letter..."

Harry frowned. "Wrote a letter? But Malfoy was in prison —" She raised her brows and looked at him with wide eyes. Harry's jaw dropped. "You're joking", he whispered. "He wrote to *Voldemort*?"

She nodded grimly, her mouth in a pale line. "He was convinced that if he didn't, he and his entire family would be killed. He had no idea that he needn't worry, after the trial..." Alicia reached out her hand and Harry took it, squeezing, to show his support. She looked at him for a moment, then away, reddening.

"So", Harry said, prompting her to continue. "What happened after he wrote the letter?"

"He finished school, and after taking the train to King's Cross, he met up with a different Death Eater where he was originally supposed to meet Malfoy."

Harry's ears pricked up at this. "Who was it? Someone we don't know about?"

She shook her head. "He didn't find out; the Death Eater was wearing a mask and hood. He said that because Roger had come as ordered, he and his family were safe, but he had to do something to *prove* his loyalty, and he was given an 'assignment'."

Harry nodded. "Right. That's standard. So — what was he supposed to do?"

She reddened again. "He was supposed to get me to marry him."

Dumbledore leaned forward, looking perplexed. "Why, my dear?"

"Well, evidently the Death Eater assumed that because Roger and I had been Head Boy and Head Girl together, we were pretty close." She allowed herself a small laugh for a moment. "Obviously, he'd never seen us at a prefects' meeting..."

Harry saw that Dumbledore's eyebrows had flown up now and wondered why. "Ah, yes. Head Boy and Head Girl. He would assume that. Right, right..."

"Roger explained to him that he had a girlfriend already", Alicia went on. "And he didn't see why his assignment should be to marry *me*, either."

He asked *why* he was supposed to do that, but the Death Eater wouldn't tell him. He just said that he'd find out everything he needed to know as the information was needed. And that he should follow orders if he knew what was good for him." She put her hand up to her mouth, trembling. Speaking through her fingers, she said, "He told Roger to use Imperius to make me go out with him and to do — other things —"

Harry squeezed the hand he still held and covered it with his other hand. After having been placed under Imperius by Lucius Malfoy, to be placed under Imperius *again*, and for a similar purpose, must have been a traumatic experience for her.

Dumbledore nodded and gave a small wave to her. "Continue when you are ready, my dear", he said softly.

She nodded, her mouth clamped tightly closed, as though she was struggling to regain her composure. "So", she finally said, "Roger did as he was told. He turned up at my parents' house, surprising me, and said he'd been sorry he was such a prat during our seventh year and hoped I would forgive him and let him take me to dinner. I remember at the time that I wanted to tell him off, but instead I heard myself accepting the invitation.

"During the rest of the summer, we went out frequently, although it was only in late August that there was finally any — physical contact between us —" she said, looking a little uncomfortable talking about this. Harry patted her hand.

"Do you want me to fetch Hermione, so you can talk to her? Would you rather not —"

She shook her head. "I — I just meant kissing. He finally kissed me after a date. What I should have realized at the time was that it was rather odd that it had taken him so long to do that." She paused and took out a handkerchief, holding it tightly, but not using it. "At any rate, when I started teaching at the village school in Hogsmeade, the September after I finished school here, he would sometimes show up after lessons were over, and then take me to a pub, or we'd go to my house or something. I was teaching him to ride, and sometimes we would go riding in the late afternoon." She smiled a little. "That was nice. He'd never ridden before. He wasn't very patient with the horses at first, but eventually he became better about that. I told him that his impatience made them nervous, and he wouldn't have as good a ride that way." She sighed. "Then, one day when he'd come to the school to meet me, Fleur Delacour happened to be

coming out of her classroom late and spotted him. She seemed to be very surprised, but that didn't prevent her from making off with him. I was shocked; I didn't know what to say or do. She just walked off with him, arm in arm, as though he was still *her* boyfriend. He acted as though I didn't exist and went along with her. I had just assumed that he was pursuing me because he and Fleur had broken up."

She looked down at her hands. "Of course, I didn't realize yet that I was under Imperius. I was quite furious with Roger, and when I went home that day I rode for a couple of hours, hoping I would calm down. When I returned to the stable, Roger was there, looking very contrite. He explained that he *had* broken up with Fleur — that he'd *told* her that it was over, but that she wasn't very mentally stable and hadn't listened. And he'd also heard about the way that veelas take rejection — which isn't very well, to put it lightly. He said that he managed to avoid her, usually, but whenever she spotted him, he had little choice but to go along. If he didn't, he wasn't sure how she might react.

"I believed him completely. We had to pretend, when we were around Fleur, that we weren't a couple. God, I was such an idiot..."

Harry grimaced on her behalf. "You were under a spell, Alicia. It wasn't your fault. And considering the way she reacted to you and Roger getting married, he was probably wise to keep her in the dark. It's possible that if he'd told her why he was pursuing you, she wouldn't have been very cooperative."

She looked gratefully at him. "Well, in the spring we'd been seeing each other for a while and still, er, just kissing a bit, now and then. Roger had been told, evidently, that he was taking too long and was ordered to — to sleep with me." She didn't look at Dumbledore. "So he suggested that I find a place in the village, which I did, since I did whatever I was told, and on the day when you came to read to my class, Harry", she told him, "Roger arrived after the children were gone for the day, and we went to my flat..."

She swallowed and Harry patted her hand again. "It's okay. You don't have to give details —" He shook his head. Putting someone under Imperius and then sleeping with them was tantamount to rape, as far as he was concerned. *Poor Alicia!* he thought.

"You don't understand, Harry. That — that was the day I found out about what had been going on", she said, her voice no longer shaking. "He

couldn't do it, you see. Even Roger had his limits, a limit to what he would do to protect his family. We were even — we were pretty far along —" she said softly. "But he suddenly threw my clothes at me and started dressing himself, saying over and over, 'I can't do this, I just can't do this...'"

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. So Roger *hadn't* violated Alicia...

"And then —?" Dumbledore prompted gently.

"Well, I demanded to know what was going on. He told me everything that had happened for the previous year. The recruitment letter, his being told to convince me to marry him. The Death Eater saying he was taking too long, ordering him to sleep with me. Roger said he had only gone along to protect his family. He was afraid they would be killed if he refused. He also said that he'd never stopped seeing Fleur. And now Fleur was pregnant with his child, and he didn't know what to do because he wanted to marry her, but he'd been ordered to marry *me*. Fleur didn't know anything about his being recruited or his sneaking around with me.

"I saw a side of Roger I'd never seen before — he'd sacrificed his own happiness for others' safety, and he'd pulled back from the opportunity to —" She swallowed and looked down. "He could have taken advantage of me, and he didn't. He said that apart from the fact that he was in love with Fleur, he respected me too much to do that to me. I was floored. He had already taken the curse off me and I felt so queer without its influence, it was almost like I was — directionless. Having my own will again felt strange after so long..."

Dumbledore nodded. "People who have been under Imperius for a long time sometimes experience something like a withdrawal afterward..." he said grimly.

"Yes. That's how I felt. Like my inner compass was gone, the thing that had been guiding me. Roger apologized profusely, but I felt that he was losing sight of something. He'd been given an order, and now how was he to carry it out?"

Harry frowned. Considering that she *had* married Roger... But then the answer dawned on him. "You said you'd help him, didn't you? That you'd go along and pretend to be in love with him and marry him, so that his family would be safe."

She nodded. "I felt — I felt like it was the least I could do. Who was I to say I didn't want to be in a sham marriage when it might be the difference between life and death for his parents and brother — and maybe

him? After he'd — he'd been rather noble about not taking advantage —" She colored, and Harry was starting to wonder whether Alicia *had* fallen for Roger, because of this 'nobility'. How awkward, he thought, if she decided she fancied him after that, knowing that he still loved Fleur, who was to be the mother of his child. Knowing that he wouldn't touch her, even though they were going to be married.

"But the question still remained", Dumbledore said quietly, "*why* was he told to marry you in the first place? The Death Eater told him to do that, then told him to step it up when he was taking too long. Why?"

"I have my suspicions. And I think Roger knew, but he didn't tell me. After we started planning the wedding, he insisted that that was all he was told to do: marry me."

Harry sat up straight. "Your dad. He was supposed to marry you to get close to your dad, and so that his working to get your dad elected would be a logical thing. He was his son-in-law, after all —" It made perfect sense now... almost.

Alicia nodded. "I think so now, too, ever since my dad was framed. I think the idea was to have someone who was a Death Eater be close to a member of Parliament. My dad."

Harry frowned now. "But — why did you tell me a wizard framed your dad? Why would someone want Roger to help get your dad elected and then go on working for him — as Roger did — only to frame him for murder, so he'd no longer be in Parliament? If the idea was to have influence over someone in government, it wasn't a very good plan, was it? Your dad was just a junior MP, after all, newly elected."

Alicia sighed. "I don't understand this either. And I can't ask Roger what's going on because he's gone now, too. I'm convinced that someone impersonated my father and killed the whip and tried to kill Clive Metford —"

"Who?"

"The MP who was wounded. He's going to testify against my dad. At any rate, I think that Roger wasn't doing what he was told to do, so the Death Eater decided to scrap the operation, and did it by framing my dad, to get him out of the way so that that woman, what's her name —"

"Who?" Harry said again.

"Joan. No, Jane. Jane Hampton-something. So she could be the new MP from Mole Valley. And I think he killed Roger, too, but I'm hoping I'm

wrong and Roger is simply on the run. I'm rather afraid for his parents; they need to be warned that their lives may be in danger. I'd have done it, but what would I say? Especially after Evan dying..." She dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief. "Poor Evan! He overheard Roger speaking to the Death Eater once, evidently, when Roger didn't know his brother was at home, or forgot. It was during the Christmas holiday, and I think Roger may have simply forgotten that Evan wasn't at school. Evan took it into his head that Roger was a Death Eater — which he was, technically — and he decided he was going to emulate his big brother. Roger only found out because Evan left a note for Roger amongst his things, explaining this, before going off to the forest with the Dueling Club. He knew it would be dangerous and thought he should write to Roger before leaving, to let him know they were on the same side, and how he'd found out about Roger being a Death Eater."

Now Harry was understanding why Evan had come after him in the forest, and why no one else knew about his ambition to be a Death Eater, including any other Death Eaters. He also understood Roger's reaction — he really blamed himself. He'd gone along with the orders he'd received so that his family would be safe; because of that his brother had died.

"And now your dad is in prison, awaiting trial", he said softly.

"Yes. He can be positively identified by Metford, *and* his fingerprints are on the gun used to shoot him and the whip. He's also on the security cameras at Whitehall. There's no jury in the world that wouldn't convict him with the kind of case the Crown can make. The only problem is — *he didn't do it*. And we have to *prove* that, somehow."

Harry swallowed. How on earth was anyone going to prove that Mr. Spinnet was innocent when the evidence was stacked against him? "Does he have an alibi? Where was he when the murder was taking place? Are there any witnesses?"

"He says he was in his office, taking a nap on the sofa. Roger saw him. Dad told him he was knackered and needed a lie-down; he felt very tired suddenly —"

"A potion", Harry said immediately. "I'll just bet he was drugged. To get him out of the way."

She nodded. "Could be. Unfortunately, since he told the police that it was Roger who saw him lie down, that also makes him the last person who saw Roger."

Harry stood and went to the window, looking out at the grounds, deep in thought. "You don't think — could it be that *Roger* was the one who framed your dad? That that was the plan all along? And that's why he's disappeared now, as he would have been your dad's only alibi, and now he appears to be another victim? Besides, if Roger *had* been told to do that and refused, wouldn't his parents have turned up dead? Do we *know* how the Davieses are? If they're alive and healthy, I'd say the suspicion rather falls on Roger, and the tricky job is to convince Scotland Yard, without bringing up magic."

Alicia shook her head vigorously. "I refuse to believe that. Roger couldn't even *sleep* with me while I was under Imperius, and his family was threatened then, too. I just can't see him killing someone..."

Harry returned to his chair. "What if someone else was threatened this time, though? What if it was Fleur — and his child? Think about it — the timing of the conception. That Death Eater who was his contact must have noticed, after all of the news about what Fleur did at your wedding, that the child she was carrying would have been conceived *after* Roger was supposed to have started seeing you. That would tip him off that Roger hadn't broken things off with Fleur. He didn't just have Roger's Mum and Dad to threaten now, who were the only family members Roger had left after Evan died. There was also Fleur and the baby." Harry remembered how Roger had cradled her in his arms, after Draco had cursed her. "He wasn't going to let anything happen to Fleur and his child. I think he framed your dad. It doesn't make sense for it to be anyone else..."

Alicia's jaw was set stubbornly. "No, Harry. I know it has to be *someone else*," she insisted. Harry was more convinced than ever that she had fallen for Roger. "And my dad is going to *prison* if we don't find some way to prove his innocence..."

"*And*", Harry added, deciding to bypass the Roger issue for the moment, "we still don't know the real purpose of the whip being killed, the other man almost being killed, and your dad going to prison to make way for that woman to take his MP position."

A sudden knock at the door made him lose his train of thought. Dumbledore said, "Come in", and when the door opened, Sirius entered, looking rather urgent. He nodded to Harry and Dumbledore.

"Hello, Harry, Albus. Hermione and Ron have filled me in on what they found in the Muggle newspapers..." He turned to Alicia then, smiling

sympathetically and holding out his hand. "And you must be Alicia Spinnet."

"Davies", she said suddenly, surprising Harry. "Alicia Davies." She didn't rise and take his hand, and he withdrew it.

Dumbledore stood. "If you will excuse me for a moment, I will arrange for the house elves to prepare accommodations for *Mrs. Davies*", he said pointedly, "in the staff wing. Harry, fill in Sirius for me, will you? And then you can escort Alicia to her rooms."

Dumbledore slipped into the next room again. Harry turned to Sirius and explained quickly what was going on. Alicia didn't interrupt him or correct him, but sat staring at her hands. When Dumbledore returned he nodded at the three of them. "Go on, then. The house elves are ready for you, my dear. I hope you will be quite comfortable. You'll be right next door to Sirius. Oh, and I need you to return after that, Sirius."

Sirius hesitated. "I can just stay, and Harry can take Alicia to her rooms."

"But I don't know where your rooms are, Sirius. I need you to show me the way", Harry told him. "I've only been to Maggie's and my aunt's rooms." Sirius nodded and they left. As he was following them out the door, Harry saw Dumbledore slip into his private chambers again.

They showed Alicia the way to the staff wing; evidently there hadn't been a reason for her to go there when she was Head Girl. She was surprised that Harry knew the password, but he said that he'd learned it when he had helped his aunt to move in. Alicia was surprised by that as well. Sirius put his hand on his arm when he mentioned his Aunt Petunia.

"I need to speak to you about that, Harry. In a bit."

Harry frowned, confused. They walked down the winding corridors and finally reached Sirius' rooms; they continued on to the door after that, which was slightly ajar. As soon as they walked in, Harry was aware of a small figure in black zipping out of the sitting room, and then he heard the familiar *crack!* of a house elf leaving. Evidently, one of the elves who had been working on Alicia's rooms hadn't left until the last moment.

Alicia looked around listlessly at the small, neat room, with its settee and chairs around the hearth and the leaded casement windows overlooking the courtyard shared by all of the staff, where Draco Malfoy had given Dunkirk exercise and where Harry and his sister had played, in

his other life. A tray sat on a low table before the fire, with a steaming pot of tea and some plates of scones and biscuits.

"Make yourself comfortable", Sirius told her. "I need to return to the headmaster's study, but I will be back to check on you later."

"I can stay with you for a bit, if you like", Harry volunteered, but Sirius shook his head. "Erm — you can also come back later, Harry. I need to talk to you about a couple of things. If you'll excuse us, Alicia?"

She nodded from the settee, where she was regarding the tea and food listlessly. Harry was worried about her; perhaps she should talk to Hermione, he thought.

In the corridor, Sirius talked to Harry as they walked back to the tapestry leading out of the staff wing. "Harry — about your aunt — "

"Oh, right! You said you wanted to —"

"She's with Jeffries."

Harry stood still. "What? Why?"

Sirius grimaced. "She seems to think that he has a more progressive view of magic than we do here at Hogwarts. And he's the one who made her magical, after all. Plus, she didn't feel that your uncle would welcome her back."

Harry shook his head. "Uncle Vernon just wrote me a letter about how upset he is with me because it's my fault that she left him. I think he *does* want her back. He's all on his own now. What's she doing with Jeffries?"

"She's part of his entourage now. She's on staff. He has a *huge* staff. There's fan mail to answer and interviews with the press to coordinate and every time they pull up and move to another venue, there are rooms to be booked and transportation to be arranged." He gave a small smile. "From what I could see, she was in her element, actually. Ordering people around. Move this here and there. Giving reservation clerks a piece of her mind on the telephone..."

"She used to be my uncle's secretary. That's how they met."

Sirius nodded. "Well, now she's practically Jeffries' right hand. I don't think he'd sneeze without asking her advice first."

Harry shook his head. "I wondered why she didn't answer my letters. I sent her some owls and I thought they were going to Little Whinging. Then I wrote to my uncle, and he said he didn't know where she is. I never could have imagined this when I was younger..."

"That isn't all I have to tell you. After months of pumping Rita Skeeter for information, all we've received from her are the names of Death Eaters who are already in Ministry custody. Nothing really useful. She still seems to be protecting someone..."

Harry nodded. "The real Daisy Furuncle, I'm guessing."

Sirius shrugged. "Maybe. We're still repairing the damage she did."

Harry sighed. "I wish we'd never trusted her." He thought of Snape being held prisoner, and having his fingers cut off. He shuddered.

Sirius grimaced. "Albus blames himself for that. He wanted to believe that she could be useful and work for the good. But evidently, she decided when Hermione was holding her in that jar that she would never work for the same side as her."

"Everything she did was to get back at Hermione? Is she really that petty?"

"Evidently so. Or at least that's what she's told us. Every time she opens her mouth it feels like she's playing with us. We're hoping she'll slip up and give us some truly useful information without meaning to."

When they left the staff wing, Sirius turned to the right and Harry to the left, so he could return to Ron and Hermione and fill them in. Somehow, he thought they would both have quite a lot to say about Alicia and Roger. And Rita Skeeter.

He was right.

The three of them sat on the floor in the seventh-year boys' dorm in Gryffindor Tower while Harry told them everything Alicia had said, and his own ideas about it.

"I agree with you", Ron said adamantly; he'd been playing with the dials on his Omnioculars while he listened to Harry and he continued to do this as he spoke. "Davies framed Alicia's dad and that's why he's disappeared. He did just what he was supposed to, or else we'd be hearing about his parents being killed, wouldn't we?"

"We still don't know that they're safe", Hermione reminded them. "And that's only one possibility. There's still the possibility that his contact in the Death Eaters did it and offed Roger. Alicia really seems to believe he's incapable of murder, according to Harry. She *did* agree to help him by marrying him, and she had to work closely with him to get her dad elected. The Death Eater may have realized that by leaving Roger's parents

untouched, it would look like he was the guilty party. To people who knew what he was told to do, that is."

Harry drew his lips into a line. "Somehow, though, I had the impression that there were some things that Alicia wasn't saying. Like how she feels about Roger. What she'd do to protect him, if she could. And what they did — if anything — involving magic to help her dad win the election. The Ministry would probably consider that illegal, I'm guessing."

Hermione's mouth twisted and she looked pensive. "I hadn't thought of that. You know, magic might not have been necessary for him to win. Now, if he'd tried to run as a Conservative in Northamptonshire and he'd won, that would be pretty suspicious, in such a predominantly Labour area, but it's no shock for a Conservative to win in Mole Valley — or anywhere in Surrey, for that matter —"

"— except in Guildford. I know, I know. You told me already." Harry shook his head. "Politics. I always avoided thinking about it when I was younger because nothing could get Uncle Vernon hacked off faster than seeing some political confrontation on the news. Even Aunt Petunia couldn't stand it when he started screaming at the telly. All liberals were 'stupid bloody farts'. He drove us all barking mad. Dudley probably had it worst, in a way. He had to sit there and parrot every political opinion Uncle Vernon spouted, when he'd much rather be blowing things up on his computer. But he wanted his son to be a little version of him — okay, not so little — so that meant Dudley had to have all of the same political opinions, too. I actually pitied him at those times — a bit. I could tell he thought it was a ruddy bore. On the other hand, I managed to sneak into his room and use his computer when that was going on downstairs. I always thought I wanted that computer so much, but then after he was gone, I never wanted to touch it really. I only used it to try to find Maggie", he said softly.

Then that made him remember what Sirius had said about his aunt. After he told them, Hermione, to his surprise, merely nodded sagely. "I thought that's where she'd go. Frankly, I was surprised that she went back to Surrey. And now it turns out she didn't. I don't know why you're so shocked, Harry. I also had an idea that she was fairly miserable here..."

Harry squinted at her. "How'd you know that?"

"Well, remember that time McGonagall asked me to cover her class for half-an-hour? Your aunt was in it, along with the Slytherin first years.

God, it was awful. Every little supposed slight someone sent in her direction was rewarded with horrible hexes from her. I don't know how many house points I took away from Slytherin before McGonagall returned..."

Ron snapped his fingers with a disappointed air. "Too bad she left. It would be pretty simple for Gryffindor to win the House Cup this year with your aunt in Slytherin, Harry." He grinned. Hermione looked like she was trying very hard *not* to smile.

"Be fair, Ron. It was very difficult for her, to be in her forties, becoming a witch and then going off to school with eleven-year-olds. How would you like it?"

Ron shrugged. "It probably didn't help that she was a generally disagreeable person. Maggie's doing all right, and she's older than all of the students in the classes she's taking. And even though she's younger than any of the other teachers, none of the third and fourth years in her Divination classes give her any trouble."

Harry nodded. "But that's probably because they respect her. When it comes to Divination, she really knows what she's doing. She's not like Trelawney. Maggie's the genuine article."

Almost as though she knew he was speaking about a Seer, Sandy suddenly hissed at him, "*She shall See*."

"Who, Sandy? See what?" It was one of the more cryptic things she had ever said to him.

She didn't answer him. "What's going on, Harry?" Hermione asked excitedly; whenever she heard Sandy talking to him, she was always very keen to know what it was about. He shrugged.

"Sandy said, *She shall see*", he told them.

"Oh", Hermione said. "Well, maybe what she meant was this —" And with a swift movement, Hermione snatched Ron's Omnioculars from him and put them to her eyes. "You know, I still haven't seen that Quidditch match from the summer, the one you keep saying I should watch on these things —"

Harry stared at Ron, his heart in his throat. *Bloody hell*. The images of Draco and Mariah down by the lake were still on there, as far as he knew. *Gosh, Sandy*, he thought sarcastically. *Thanks for the warning*.

Ron swallowed and reached out for the Omnioculars. "Um, Hermione, you don't really want to see that game. I know how bored you are by

Quidditch. Just hand me the —"

But it was too late. Hermione was staring into the eyepieces with her mouth open in surprise. She had gone very stiff as she continued to watch what was before her, and Harry braced himself. *Oh no oh no oh no. Not again. Now they're going to have a huge row...*

"Ron! Harry!" she said in wonder. "Have you seen what's *on* here?"

They looked at each other guiltily. "Look, Hermione, it's all my fault", Harry said, his voice shaking. "Don't blame Ron. It was my idea to try to find a way to —"

She lowered the Omnioculars from her face and frowned at him. "What on earth are you talking about?"

Ron and Harry looked at each other and back at her. "Erm", Harry said. "What are *you* talking about?"

"Here. Let me rewind it first", she mumbled, fiddling with the dials again. Harry wondered how he and Ron were going to get out of *this* one. Hermione checked the position of the Omnioculars and then handed them back to Ron. "Now flick the `forward' switch", she instructed him. He looked at Harry uncertainly, and Harry wondered whether Ron was going to do something like say, "*Hermione!* I have *no idea* how that was recorded by my Omnioculars..."

Instead, after viewing for a few minutes, Ron's jaw also dropped. "*Bloody hell*", he breathed, his eyes glued to the eyepieces. "So it's *her*! I should have known..."

Harry frowned. "Would one of you care to enlighten me?" he whinged, feeling a bit left out suddenly.

"Rewind it and show Harry", Hermione said to Ron. Ron did, and handed the Omnioculars to him. He frowned when he first looked in the eyepieces; the image was frozen, and it appeared to be solid green. He had no idea what he was looking at. Ron reached over and flicked the `forward' switch, and the image started moving. He also heard, very softly, the voices of the people nearby. Evidently, Ron had accidentally had his Omnioculars set on `record' when they were waiting in line to go into the Quidditch game. The green he was seeing was the grass of the pitch, and soon after the image started moving, Harry saw Ron's rather large feet move into view; Harry remembered that Ron had been swinging the Omnioculars around impatiently while he was waiting. As the images jumped around unpredictably, showing his feet and lower robes, Ron's feet

and robes, and then Ginny's, Harry heard again the conversation they were having while waiting for the Aurors to screen all of the spectators...

He heard a soft thud which was him kicking a piece of turf, followed by his muttering, *"Why are they even bothering to hold Quidditch matches if they're so worried about security?"*

"Stop it when Ginny mentions getting to the bottom of the Diagon Alley attack", Ron instructed him loudly.

"Blimey, Harry," he heard Ron again; this time his voice was faint and faraway, coming from the tiny speakers on the Omnioculars, projecting the sound directly at his ears, but so quietly people around him couldn't hear it. *"Do you know how people would panic if the League Cup was canceled? I mean, the attack on Diagon Alley was bad, but they never even canceled the League Cup during You-Know-Who's first reign of terror. Everyone would think it was the end of the world if they did that."*

"You mean they wouldn't have a good way to pacify everyone," Ginny countered; all Harry could see of her was her hand waving impatiently in the air. *"This way, they can simultaneously occupy people with mindless sport —"*

"Bread and circuses", he heard himself mutter.

"— and make it look like the Ministry's really doing something, just because they're checking over everyone who's entering the stadium. I'm sure they're really going to get to the bottom of the Diagon Alley attack by doing that."

Harry flicked the 'stop' switch abruptly and stared at the image before him. In the upper left-hand corner of the picture was part of a woman's face. Ron must really have been swinging the Omnioculars around wildly; Harry was used to his nervous habits and hadn't thought twice about it at the time, but now, because of his having been recording and swinging the Omnioculars around, Ron accidentally documented the presence of someone else standing nearby...

He lowered the instrument from his face and stared at his best friends. "Is that who I think it is?"

Hermione nodded. "Which means *she's* got to be one of the Daisy Furuncles! It had to be someone who was near enough to hear what you were saying, since Ginny's words ended up in that article Daisy Furuncle wrote. Except she was attributing it to *you*, Harry, not Ginny. So why should 'Daisy Furuncle' protect Ginny?" Harry furrowed his brow. It was a

good question. Hermione, however, evidently didn't think he wouldn't know the answer to this. "Harry!" she cried, exasperated. "She did it because Ginny was still Draco's girlfriend at the time! Don't you see? She was protecting Ginny because of Draco..."

Harry looked at the image again; the nose, the hair. He flicked `forward' again and a hood was swiftly pulled over the head and the woman turned away, while Ron's indignant voice was heard in the background:

"Ginny! Don't say things like that here, all right?"

He heard his own voice then, although all he could see now were Ron's shoes again. *"I agree with Ron, Ginny. You can't be too careful what you say in public. Rant back at Hog's End, all right?"*

He stopped it again and lowered the instrument once more. The three of them looked at each other; Harry saw that Ron and Hermione were frowning at him. He bristled at them.

"What? What are you looking at *me* that way for?"

"Because", Hermione said, sounding just a little put-out. "That's the mother of your new best friend."

Harry drew his mouth into a line. "He's not my best friend. You two are. And he can't control his mum. She disowned him, remember?"

Ron looked skeptical. "Whenever she's mentioned her son, which wasn't often, it was never too bad. She may be having second thoughts about cutting him off. Maybe she thought they could make up if she wrote nasty articles about all of the people he didn't like — you, me — "

"Sirius", Harry said suddenly. "She wrote some awful things about Sirius. And she tried to make out that Katie was an idiot for going with me. She also mentioned Sam going to prison..."

"Or —" Hermione said slowly, looking thoughtful. "Perhaps you and Sirius and Sam, among others, were targeted because she thought there was a danger of his *not* hating you anymore. You and Malfoy were working with Sam and Katie during the summer, and Malfoy went to Ascog — Sirius' home — for part of his holiday... She needs to bring him back to her side if there's to be any kind of Malfoy family reunion. So she has to drag *your* names through the mud. She may have hoped that if she did this it would mean he wouldn't be feeling too kindly toward all of you..."

"You think?" Harry frowned. He lifted the Omnioculars to his face again and rewound the images slightly, so he could catch that glimpse again of Narcissa Malfoy's face. After watching it again, he lowered them and sighed.

"Unfortunately, now that Alicia's dad has been framed, Sirius and the other operatives will be a bit busy with that. When a man's life is on the line, I can't very well ask Sirius to go looking into Malfoy's mum, just because she wrote some nasty things." He frowned, feeling vaguely discontented. Hermione agreed. Ron, however, looked like he felt very restless about this.

"Oh, come on, Harry. Can't we at least send her a howler?" he pleaded. Harry laughed; the idea was tempting. Hermione looked a bit wistful for a moment, and sighed.

"What's with you, then?" Ron asked her, putting his hand on the back of her neck and rubbing affectionately. She looked like she was coming out of a lovely reverie.

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking of sending *Rita Skeeter* a howler, actually. One which would burst open and send bubotuber pus flying all over her..."

The three of them burst out laughing then at this agreeable mental image, and while they were laughing, Harry saw Ron surreptitiously throw the Omnioculars under his bed, before Hermione took it into her head to look at anything else he had saved on them.

* * *

Now, whenever Sirius wasn't teaching Apparition, he was off investigating Alicia's father's case. He knew a good lawyer for Mr. Spinnet, a witch who had studied law and was a barrister. Harry, Ron and Hermione visited Alicia every day in her rooms. Ron, oddly enough, was especially helpful in keeping her spirits up, telling her a number of things his doctor had told him when he'd been in St. Mungo's. Harry was impressed.

On the last day of the term, Harry, Hermione and the other Gryffindors went to the village with Sirius to take the Floo network to London. They were going to the Department of Magical Transportation to take their Apparition tests. To avoid taking a large number of students in one go, the Slytherins, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs had already gone. Harry didn't care for the idea of Crabbe and Goyle Apparating — but then he learned that they'd both failed, and would have to try again. He'd felt pressure to

do well before, but now he *really* felt pressure. The last thing he wanted to do was be like Crabbe and Goyle...

They went alphabetically. Since Lavender had stopped attending Apparition lessons, Seamus went first, standing with his wand poised before him, visibly shaking. One moment he was there, the next — he had vanished with a *pop!* The problem was — his clothes remained. "Bloody hell!" Sirius exclaimed when he saw the pile of clothes on the ground, including Seamus' drawers. He smiled feebly at the Ministry official who stood nearby; Harry thought he remembered his name being Basil, from the World Cup. "Excuse me; be right back", he said quietly, clearly embarrassed that Seamus had bollixed the test. He took the clothes and with a wave of his wand Disapparated with a *pop!*

They all started snickering when Sirius was gone, unable to resist. Harry imagined poor Seamus standing with nothing on in the cold December wind at Broome Park, the wizarding estate in Kent where they were supposed to be going (it was where Ron went for practice when he was playing on the English team). But then they sobered, catching Basil's eye; there was no guarantee any of them would fare any better. Harry thought very, very hard about his destination. *It's in Barham parish, halfway between Canterbury and Dover...* He pictured Kent on a map of England, thought about what it would be like to fly there on a broom, or better still, as a golden griffin. The landscape and villages, the tiny houses and churches and schools would pass too quickly to be really seen...

Sirius *popped!* back into their midst, no longer carrying the clothes. "Wait a minute before taking your try, Hermione. Seamus needs a few minutes to get dressed. He arrived at the right place, just a little south of the house, actually..."

Basil held a clipboard with a piece of parchment on it; he made some rather angry-sounding scratches on the parchment with his quill. "He'll have to be taking the test again", Basil proclaimed. "We can't allow people to jump around the country naked..."

Harry saw that a smile was pulling at the corners of his mouth, and Sirius', too. *They'd laugh, too, if they thought it would be all right*, Harry thought. When they reckoned that enough time had passed to allow Seamus to dress, Hermione took out her wand, a look of fierce concentration on her face, as she closed her eyes and waved her wand... Harry wasn't prepared for the abrupt way she simply disappeared. He felt

like his heart was going a mile a minute, as he hoped desperately that she had made it. Sirius, however, did not look like he was concerned about this.

"All right then, I'll check on Hermione and be right back", he said, once again Disapparating. Little by little, their numbers were diminishing. Neville would be next, then Parvati, and Harry would be last, since Ron couldn't Apparate. Dean would have been taking his test, but he didn't feel he was as far along as the others and wanted to continue learning what he could after the New Year, in order to take his test at Easter.

Sirius returned and reported that Hermione had been successful. Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Then he felt nervous all over again, on Neville's behalf, watching him vanish. Sirius went to check on him, as well. When he returned this time, he was grinning broadly. "That's two out of three! Not too bad..." Harry smiled at him. His students doing well reflected well on *him*. Harry was also glad to hear that Neville had done all right; he had been more worried about him than Seamus, before coming to the Ministry. Parvati looked nervous, but waved her wand and disappeared, like the others. Sirius returned from checking on her and said she'd been successful. Now it was Harry's turn.

Taking a deep breath, he waved his wand and thought again about the geography, the landscape, feeling a tingling all over that was like and yet unlike the Animagus Transfiguration. He'd done this before, when he'd Apparated to the opposite side of the Hogsmeade village hall, or from one end of the High Street to the other. They'd done plenty of practice Apparition during their lessons, in the past few weeks, but it had always been within Hogsmeade, to places they'd *been* before, places they'd seen and could picture quite easily. He decided that Apparition felt similar to separating his mind from his body, when he did the pain blocking, but he knew that he was actually traveling along a unique sort of *fluid* dimension in which he was made only of *thought*. As his thoughts turned to his body and clothes and the destination, he felt the tingling again, more strongly, as he appeared with a *pop!* on the estate in Kent, with Hermione, Seamus, Neville and Parvati standing about twenty feet away. He grinned, looking up at the enormous orange brick house with its jagged roofline and multiple chimneys. As soon as he arrived, the others burst into applause. He turned to them, grinning even more broadly, unable to believe how excited he was.

Thirty seconds later, Sirius arrived nearby; he turned and grinned at Harry. Clapping his hands for all of them now, he said, "Well done! Oh, very well done, everyone! And Seamus — I think Basil may let you take the test over while you're on your holiday, so you won't have to wait until Easter. All right?"

Seamus nodded. "That's grand", he said, his voice full of relief.

"Very well, then!" Sirius said. "You should be very proud of yourselves. But remember — the test is really only half over. We have to get all of you *back* now."

They looked at each other in alarm. They had to Apparate to the Department of Magical Transportation? Underneath Regis House, in the disused King William Street tube station that had been a bomb shelter during the Second World War?

"All right, then! We'll start from the end of the alphabet this time. You're up, Harry!"

He swallowed, no longer wondering why they'd been told very carefully about the location of the tube station, and about the large building it was under, which had been rebuilt the year before. (That had caused a number of nightmares concerning keeping the Muggles from excavating into the Ministry offices, according to Sirius.) He repeated the process of mentally flying over the landscape, picturing the room where Basil would be waiting for them...

The flowing, liquid feeling of being *thought*... the tingling sensation... With a *pop*! Harry reappeared before Basil, who, with a bored expression, made a quick mark on his parchment with his quill, then suggested that Harry move out of the way, to make it less likely that someone else would splinch themselves or land on top of him. He hurried across the room to where Basil stood, and watched as Parvati, Neville and Hermione reappeared one at a time. As each additional person arrived, they clapped in congratulations, and Basil made his marks on the parchment. The four of them stood on the far side of the room with Basil, waiting for what seemed rather a long time.

Finally, Seamus reappeared.

His clothes did not.

"Bugger!" he exclaimed. He used his hands to cover himself. "Hermione! Parvati! Bloody hell, turn around, can't you?"

They did, both trying to stifle their laughter; Harry's cheeks hurt from stifling his, and Neville caught his eye; he was grinning ear to ear. *He* had passed, and hadn't lost his clothes in the process. Sirius arrived, again carrying Seamus' clothes, looking resigned. They waited with their backs turned while Seamus dressed, swearing under his breath.

* * *

The next morning, when most of the students who were going home for the holiday were packing, preparing to ride in the horseless carriages to the Hogsmeade train station, Harry let himself into the staff wing to find out whether Alicia was ready to leave for Hog's End. Harry had daily visited with Alicia in her rooms, usually with Ron, Hermione and Sirius.

Harry, Ron, Ginny, Hermione and Neville were going down to Hog's End for the holiday and Alicia was invited, too. Sirius, Snape and Maggie were to come for Christmas dinner on Thursday, and then Harry and Sirius were going to Ascog for most of the rest of the holiday, except for the European Cup final the day after Boxing Day (where they were meeting the residents of Hog's End as well as the other Weasleys, plus Snape and Maggie), and the broomstick race in Sweden on the last day of the year, to which Draco Malfoy was also invited. Harry had actually invited him to come to Ascog after Christmas, but to his surprise, Draco had declined, only accepting the invitation to the race.

Alicia wasn't in the sitting room when he let himself in, so he knocked gently at the bedroom door, calling, "Alicia! Are you ready? The carriages will be leaving soon..." When he received no answer, he debated whether to open the door to check on her. She was rather despondent when she first arrived at the castle, and there was little good news Sirius had been able to give her since then. He carefully turned the knob and found that she was still in bed, sleeping peacefully. But she wasn't alone.

"*Sirius!*" Harry hissed at him. He lifted his shaggy black head and wagged his tail at Harry, giving him what seemed to be an appeasing smile, although it was hard to tell when Sirius was in his dog form. Alicia, under the covers, had one arm thrown over Sirius' body possessively. He lay on top of the blankets. She still slept peacefully, a small smile on her face. "*What do you think you're doing?*" Harry demanded of his godfather.

Sirius looked at Alicia, then Harry, shaking his head. He turned back to Alicia and nudged her gently with his nose. Her eyes opened slowly; she gave the dog an affectionate smile and stroked his soft fur dreamily, down

the length of his back and onto his flanks. Harry swallowed, remembering Ginny touching him that way when he was in his griffin form. Then she looked up and noticed Harry standing in the doorway.

"Oh, Harry! What time is it? I'm sorry I overslept. I did pack last night, so I only need to dress." She noticed him looking with disbelief at the large black dog. "Oh, isn't he lovely? He's Sirius' dog, but he said I could keep him with me at night. Wasn't that nice of him? I have to admit, I never expected Sirius Black to be — how he is. I'm not sure I can explain it. After the way we were all so panicked, when I was in fifth year..."

"Erm", Harry said awkwardly. "Right." He didn't know what to say. Alicia thought the dog was — a dog. Belonging to Sirius. She didn't realize it was Sirius himself. "So — has he been spending every night with you?" Harry tried to keep his voice from going up in pitch.

She leaned down and hugged the dog tightly, burying her face in his fur. "Yes. Snuffles has been very comforting, haven't you Snuffles? Funny, Sirius Black having a dog with a name like that. Seems like the sort of thing an old lady would name her dog..."

Harry tried not to laugh at her assessment. "Well, Snuffles and I will go into the next room and let you dress..."

"Oh, don't worry about the dog. He can stay. I'll be ready in a minute."

Harry hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and closed the door, wondering whether Alicia had been dressing every day with "Snuffles" in the same room. *Lucky dog* he thought for a moment, before squashing that thought.

He had to admit, though, Alicia seemed more cheerful than she had when she first arrived. When she opened the door she was levitating a suitcase before her. The large black dog followed. Harry gave Sirius a *look*, but Sirius gave what seemed to be a very pointed yawn and turned away. *Oh, no you don't*, Harry thought. *We need to talk...*

When they arrived at Hog's End, Fred greeted them in the drive, the front door of the house open behind him. "Happy Christmas, everyone!" he crowed, his messy red hair standing up all over his head. He helped his little sister and Hermione and Alicia down from the carriage, giving Alicia an extra hug when he had her on the ground.

"Alicia! How ripping to see you! I'm, er, sorry about your dad..."

Alicia ducked her head for a moment, then lifted a smiling face to Fred. "Thanks for letting me come for the holiday. My mum is staying in

the flat in London that she and dad took after he was elected; she goes to see him every day. I just — I just couldn't bear the idea of being down there, seeing him like that... I'm glad to be back with old friends..." She smiled affectionately at Fred, who hugged her again.

"And Katie's here, too!" he said. "She's done with her training. It'll be just like old times, except for no Oliver. We invited him, but he's spending the holiday with his family. You've got to come to the match with us, on Saturday. We can all see Oliver then — he said he's going with his older brother, Alex. Bill knew him at school. Say you'll come?" Fred smiled winningly and it was clear that Alicia couldn't resist. She laughed, the first time Harry had seen her do so since she had returned to Hogwarts. He'd had a feeling the twins would be good for her.

"Of course I'll come. I haven't seen a good Quidditch match in ages."

Once they were inside, Ron, Ginny and Hermione opened their wickerwork cat carriers and loosed Crookshanks, MacKenzie and Argent upon the house. The cats stretched and started sniffing the various unfamiliar corners, rubbing against furniture and establishing who had which choice spot before the fire. Ginny and Hermione went up to the room that used to be Harry's, in his other life; Harry and Ron went to the room that used to be Jamie's. Katie and Alicia would share the room where Ron had been the previous summer. Neville was sharing with Percy. There was a flurry of welcoming in the front hall; George was hugging his sister and Hermione and Alicia and pounding Ron and Harry on the back. Lee was being gregarious as ever, making them all laugh with a very high-pitched impersonation of an old witch in Nottinghamshire who wasn't sure whether she wanted to sell their wares in her sweetshop. Percy waved his arms, directing traffic and ordering the twins to carry their guests' luggage to their rooms.

Harry smiled, standing in the hall, looking about at the Christmas decorations. He felt like he'd come home; this was where he should be, for the holiday. A hand appeared on his shoulder and he turned, surprised to see that it was Katie. She was smiling at him. "Happy Christmas, Harry", she said quietly, then hugged him. Harry held her for a moment, closing his eyes, glad that she was safe, but worried about what she would be facing, now that she was an Auror. He pulled back from her and smiled down at her.

"Happy Christmas, Katie", he replied, seeing that she was looking at him fondly, instead of with a faint air of resentment, as at the wedding. "How's your dad?"

"He's fine. He's coming to Christmas dinner, and then I'll be staying with him for Boxing Day. We'll see all of you at the match on Saturday. He said you were brilliant against England! Of course, you had to go and win..." She smiled mischievously.

Harry laughed. "Oh, well, I have to admit — I felt a little like a traitor myself. Welsh by birth, but English by upbringing, you know."

"And now, technically, a resident of Scotland. Well, I'm just sorry you won't be playing on Saturday. It sounds like France will be very hard to beat."

Harry nodded. "They're very rough. Fantastic Seeker. But I've also heard that Romania has an amazing team. What I've been reading in the *Prophet* says it should be an even better match than the World Cup game between Ireland and Bulgaria."

Alicia whirled around. "Where's Angelina? Where's my other old teammate?" Harry realized that Angelina wasn't in the hall. George colored and looked oddly sheepish.

"She's having a lie-down", Katie told her, blushing for some reason. "She hasn't been feeling very well lately. Don't worry — you can go up and see her in a bit, Alicia."

Harry followed Ron up to their room. After they were finished unpacking, Ron went to the door and said with a forced casualness, "I'll check on Hermione and Ginny..."

Harry grinned at him. "You mean you're going to kick Ginny out of the room for a while so you and Hermione can be alone..."

Ron looked enormously offended by this. "Harry! What do you take me for?"

Harry grinned at him. "You have to ask? I wasn't criticizing... Just go already. Hermione's probably expecting you, right?"

He turned bright red. "Er, yeah. She is."

Ron left while Harry shook his head, opening and closing drawers. He was rather surprised, however, when a minute later, the door to the room opened and Ginny entered. He stared at her, wondering why, if Ron and Hermione had kicked her out of her room, she had chosen to come here, of all places.

"Ginny! What are you doing here?" he asked; then he wanted to bite his tongue. It sounded like he was about to kick her out too, when that was the last thing he wanted to do. On the other hand, he wasn't all that keen to be told off again...

She gave him a small smile. "I — I wanted to talk to you. I need to tell you something — a lot of things." She sat on the end of the bed and patted the space next to her. Harry sat, confused. She was being friendlier than he'd seen her since she'd told him off (and Draco and Mariah) for carrying on with Mariah in the tunnels under the castle grounds.

Being so close to her again was almost unbearable. He knew he wasn't completely over her, but he'd managed to not think about her *too* much. Apart from ogling her when they went running. And when she sat by the fire in the common room, reading. And when she dueled during Dueling Club meetings, her hair like a fiery halo round her determined face... *Erg*. He'd tried to occupy himself with other concerns, like Alicia, so he *couldn't* think about her, but it wasn't dreadfully successful. Spending time with Draco hadn't helped, either. Somehow, they wound up talking about Ginny quite a lot.

She took his hand in hers and he swallowed, looked down at her, aware of how close together they were sitting, and that they were sitting on a *bed*.

"First — I want to apologize, Harry, for the way I had to speak to you when I broke up with Draco."

"*Had* to speak to me?" Harry choked out. "You told me you loved me, we were even using your sister's powers to communicate, and then —"

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "I know, Harry. But I — I had to put on a good show in front of Draco. I'm still not completely sure whether he believed it, but now that it seems the two of you might actually be *friends* —"

He pulled away from her and lifted her head by putting his hand under her chin. "*A good show*? Is that what it was?"

He felt her tremble. "Please don't be angry, Harry. I did it to protect you. Well, it wasn't just me — it's a long story..." Tears began to escape her eyes and roll down her cheeks.

"You mean", Harry said, incredulous, "you didn't mean it? You — you just didn't want Draco to hurt me?"

She smiled. "You're calling him Draco now! How funny —"

He rose and walked toward the window. He realized that he was shaking with rage. He whirled on her. "Do you know what you put me through, Ginny? Why couldn't you have let me in on the plan? Why did you have to hurt me that way?"

She looked at him in shock. "I just said! But — but now that you're friends with Draco —"

He strode toward her. "I am friends with him because I know what he can be. What he can do, if he wants to. I know that he drew a short straw in this life and that he doesn't have to be a complete prat. Yes, I thought about the Obedience Charm a bit, but that's not the only reason I'm his friend now. Do you know I showed him my Pensieve?"

Her jaw dropped. "So — he knows —"

"That you were my girlfriend. Yes."

"And — and how did he take that?"

Harry crossed his arms. "Not too badly, actually. He reckons that it technically never happened, so getting upset about it is pointless..."

She smiled and walked to him, throwing her arms around his neck. "This is wonderful! Maybe he'll be able to handle the idea of our being together in *this* life! Maybe —"

He cut her off, pulling her to him roughly, unable to be so close to her anymore without kissing her. He held her face up and covered her mouth with his, opening his mouth and drinking her in, feeling her surprise turn to passion as she tightened her hold on him and kissed him back. But then, something at the back of his mind bothered him, and he pulled back from her, taking her arms from around his neck and walking to the window again.

"What's wrong, Harry?" she whispered.

He stared at the drive before the house. "I don't know, Ginny. I still love you. I do. I can't help it. And I want you so badly it *hurts* sometimes. But I'm very *angry* with you, too. And I don't know how long it will take me to get past that. I think — I'm just not ready to stop being angry." He turned and looked at her shocked face. He was more than a little surprised himself at what he was saying. "I'm not ready to forgive you."

Now she wasn't so much shocked as equally angry. "*You're* not ready to forgive *me*? What about when I saw you with Mariah? Do you know how I felt?"

"She's a *selkie*, Ginny! I didn't exactly have a choice!"

"I know!" she cried. "But do you think it was any easier to remember seeing the two of you, even knowing that? I still *saw* you together. *And* I had the pleasure of finding you in bed with Katie. To say nothing of when you were with Hermione..."

He strode toward her, feeling angrier and angrier. "I was trying to convince myself I had to get over you. I was with other people because you told me repeatedly that you were with Draco and that was that. And what about when I had to see you and Draco in the amulet, taking each other's clothes off in the greenhouse? At a time when you say you loved me? He's not a bloody selkie, or a veela, or anything. What's *your* excuse?"

She trembled and he could see the fire in her eyes. "I was his girlfriend at the time, largely because I was protecting *you*, not that you seem to care —"

They were standing toe-to-toe, shouting in each other's faces. "I would rather have had the choice of dealing with Draco Malfoy myself and having you by my side!" he yelled.

"I would rather have been in the greenhouse with you any day!" she screamed back at him.

They were standing very close, red-faced with anger, chests heaving with emotion. Harry swallowed and pulled her to him again, whispering, "*Bloody hell*," before covering her mouth with his once more, kissing her hungrily, feeling her kissing him back, her hands sliding up under his jumper, then pulling his shirt from his trousers and sliding her hands under the fabric, her touch on his bare skin inflaming him further, making him press her to him so that her breasts were crushed against his chest, her heart beating against his.

Every nerve in his body was standing at attention, and he could feel her trembling from head to foot. He wasn't sure how long they were kissing when he pulled his mouth away from hers and moved his lips along her jaw, then down her neck. She removed her hands from his back and pulled his jumper off over his head; after allowing her to do that, he clamped his mouth on her neck again as her fingers flew to his shirt's buttons. A feeling of desperation seemed to flow through them, telling them *now, now*. Before something else happened to drive them apart...

"The warriors of light shall come."

Harry lifted his mouth from her neck. He looked down at her passion-clouded face; her cheeks were quite pink, her lips swollen from kissing.

"Sandy says that someone's coming, Ginny", he told her softly, his heart pounding in his ears. "I'm not sure who. This — this probably isn't the time or place for — for —" He swallowed and tried to steady his breathing, every swear word he knew rocketing through his head. What he really wanted to do was rip her clothes off and pick her up, take her to the bed, but instead he backed away slightly and sat in a chair next to the desk, slowly buttoning his shirt, trying to calm down but still feeling like he'd run about ten miles...

How did we go from screaming at each other to kissing? he wondered, staring at her. But when he saw her standing before him, still looking angry and passionate both, her hand on her sternum as her ribcage rose and fell, he didn't wonder this for long. It was possible that they could have an even more volatile relationship than Ron and Hermione. *Relationship?* Were they going to have a relationship? As he gazed at her, it was very difficult to not leap forward and take her in his arms again. He didn't remember ever feeling quite this way in his other life, when he was with her.

But suddenly, the door to the room opened and to Harry's surprise, Katie and Percy were standing there. Katie looked particularly surprised to see Ginny and Harry in the room.

"Oh! I, erm, thought — we thought we heard someone having a row. Well, anyway, we've had all of this wonderful snow, and we were going to go out and enjoy it. Coming?" Katie raised one eyebrow as she spoke, looking back and forth between Harry and Ginny.

He swallowed and forced a smile. "Er, yeah. That sounds great. I'll tell Ron and Hermione", he said quickly, hoping that Katie and Percy hadn't already tried walking into the other bedroom.

He had a feeling that something like that had already occurred, however, when Katie's smile turned rather mischievous and she said, "Oh, they *know* already. We shouted through the door. We weren't expecting to find it locked..."

Harry felt himself reddening. He was glad now that he and Ginny hadn't done anything else — he hadn't considered the possibility that someone would walk in on them. And while Percy might look amused at the idea of his younger brother sleeping with his girlfriend, Harry wasn't certain how he'd react to his little *sister* being in a similar situation...

"I'll get my cloak", Ginny said quickly, practically running from the room.

Katie raised her eyebrows, giving Harry a knowing smile. Percy, on the other hand, looked at him suspiciously. "Erm, going out in the snow sounds like fun. I'll be right there", he said, nodding at them. Finally, they left, closing the door. Harry put his jumper on again, then did some deep breathing to try to collect himself.

"Thanks for the warning, Sandy", he said to her feelingly. "I'm not sure what they would have seen if I didn't know they were coming."

"I have no control over what I See", Sandy reminded him. "I do know that I am glad that the shouting stopped. When you are angry, it makes me very nervous. For one thing, your arm becomes far too warm."

"Sorry, Sandy. Do you want to stay indoors while I go out? You probably don't want to be where it's snowy."

"That would be my preference, Harry Potter." She slithered out of his sleeve and he picked her up, carrying her from the room. He was very glad that he'd found her again in the park in Little Whinging.

He left Sandy curled up in a basket near the large old cooker in the kitchen and went to get his cloak; while he was fastening it, something suddenly occurred to him. He strode back into the front hall, remembering something Katie had said months ago about her trip to Hog's End...

I actually had quite a nice time this weekend. I spent most of it with — with the other Auror applicant...

Percy and Katie were bundling up in their cloaks and gloves, wrapping their old Gryffindor mufflers around their throats, and Harry stood before them, tapping his foot with his arms folded and one eyebrow raised. They stopped abruptly and stared at him.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Katie asked him, a slight shake in her voice.

"Oh, I'm fine. Tell me, what would you say is a good definition for 'Auror'? Would 'warrior of light' be a fairly accurate one?"

Percy frowned at him. "Yes, but why are you —"

Harry stepped toward Percy and pushed his finger at Percy's chest. "You, Percy Weasley, are an *Auror*, aren't you?"

Percy dropped his jaw. "Did the twins tell you?" he said, his voice dropping to a whisper.

Harry hid his surprise that the twins knew. "No. Katie did. Months ago. She told me that she'd been to the screening tests with someone else who lived in Hogsmeade, and then just a few minutes ago, my snake Sandy told me *The warriors of light shall come*. She used the *plural*. Sandy doesn't make mistakes about things like that."

Percy dropped his jaw. "Well. I suppose I know why you have that pet snake now."

Harry nodded. "I don't tell just anyone about this, mind you, but as you're Aurors, it's the sort of thing you should probably know. She has the Sight. All snakes do. Why do you think Voldemort has one?"

Percy shook his head. "I didn't know before, but I do now." He put his arm around Harry's neck, walking to the kitchen with him. "Perhaps if I'm going to do this, I should talk a bit with the resident expert on the Dark Lord?" he grinned. Harry was relieved to see that Percy had loosened up. Perhaps that was the Auror training.

"After Christmas", Harry said. "First we have a serious snowball battle to wage", he said, grinning and opening the back door. He ushered Katie and Percy into the garden, forgetting briefly that this was Percy's house and not the Snape-Evans-Potter house.

After a minute, Ron, Hermione and Ginny turned up, plus Neville, Lee and the twins. Alicia was evidently staying indoors to keep Angelina company. The ten of them managed to do a rather good job of pretending that they weren't of-age, or prefects, or successful businessmen, or newly-trained Aurors. They ran and laughed and sent charmed snowballs flying after each other (all except Ginny, who couldn't do magic away from school). Harry was trying to help Ginny evade some snowballs the twins had sent her way, but she pushed him out of the way and instead caught them in the air, sending them hurtling back at Fred and George. Harry marveled at her, but a minute later Fred and George were sending far too many snowballs at her for her to manage in this way, and Harry pulled her down behind a snowbank as the cloud of snowballs began to bear down on her.

A second later, they found themselves tumbling down a small embankment, getting snowier and snowier by the moment. When they stopped rolling, Harry looked up at Ginny; she was radiant, her cheeks glowing with healthy color, her eyes sparkling, her long fiery curls escaping from her hood. Knowing that they were too far from the others to

be seen, he pulled her down to him suddenly in a kiss, unable to resist her, and she immediately succumbed. He rolled them so that he was leaning over her, devouring her mouth, then moving his lips down to her throat, making her gasp and grip his arms tightly.

"Um, Harry?" she whispered as his teeth nipped at her neck lightly.

"Yes?" he murmured between kisses. He felt both cold and hot simultaneously, a curious sensation.

"Does this mean that you're not angry with me anymore?"

He rose and looked down at her, considering this question. "No", he answered simply. He saw how confused she looked before he claimed her mouth again; she laced her fingers into his hair, holding him in place; her fingers were making his scalp prickle pleasantly. But a minute later she pulled his face away from her.

"So, you're doing this even though you're still angry?"

"Well — a *little* angry —" he admitted. "But somehow — " He remembered how electrifying it had been when the two of them had been shouting at each other in his room, before they had kissed...

She nodded. "Right. Shut up and kiss me", she ordered him. He looked at her with one eyebrow raised.

"I'll kiss you when I'm ready, Ginny Weas —"

But she had pulled his face down to hers again and his words were cut off.

He didn't complain.

* * *

That night, it was very hard for Harry to watch Ginny go off to the same room as Hermione, while he had to go to the room he was sharing with Ron. His best friend dropped off almost immediately. Harry grimaced and pulled the covers back to his side of the bed; Ron wouldn't know the difference. He slept like the dead. *If*, Harry thought, *dead people slept while sounding like a thousand sawmills...*

Eventually, despite Ron's snoring, he fell deep asleep. When an unfamiliar weight on his chest and a painful pricking on his face woke him and his eyes flew open, he was surprised to see that a grey morning light was already filtering into the room. Then, suddenly, everything went black. And furry. And there was a lot of loud purring.

"MacKenzie", Harry said irritably to the large fuzzy black cat that had once been Ginny's tiny fluffy kitten, "get off my face." The cat backed up a

little, sitting on his chest, looking at him with baleful yellow eyes, still purring loudly. Then she touched his face again with her claws. He winced and batted her paw away. "Cut that out", he told her, reaching out to rub the side of her face. The purring increased in volume and she leaned into his hand appreciatively, urging him on. "How did you get in here, then, eh?" he asked her as he chucked her under the chin. He glanced at the door, which he was certain had been securely closed when they'd gone to bed. It was now slightly ajar. He smiled at the cat. "You were sent to fetch me, weren't you?" She merely pushed her nose at his hand, purring some more. Harry laughed softly and picked her up, throwing back the covers. He put her down, donned his dressing gown, then cradled her against him and rubbed her fuzzy belly while he walked. "Let's go find your mistress then, shall we?"

In the corridor he put her down and she trotted purposefully to the stairs, then began descending them. Harry followed. When she scratched at the door of the drawing room, Harry turned the knob, completely unsurprised to find Ginny sitting in front of the fire in her dressing gown. The Christmas tree nearby was adorned in sparkling lights that made her look like she had a golden aura. She turned and smiled at him. He closed the door; the cat went to a squashy armchair and curled in a circle on the seat, tucking her nose into her tail. Harry sat beside Ginny on the hearth rug, also hugging his knees to his chest, grinning. "MacKenzie told me you were waiting for me down here", he said.

"Oh, really? So you're not just a Parseltongue?"

He laughed. "Oh, sure. I'm a regular Doctor Doolittle."

"Who?" She frowned. He shook his head.

"Never mind." He put his arms around her and pushed her hair from her brow. "It doesn't matter..." But then he thought of something that *did* matter. It mattered quite a lot. It had been bothering him the day before, but he hadn't been able to articulate it when he'd been so angry about other things...

She had leaned in, expecting him to kiss her, but he pulled back and frowned. She opened her eyes and saw that he was frowning at her, and she frowned back. "What's wrong, Harry?"

He breathed heavily through his nose. "Neville."

She turned to look at the fire again. "Oh, is that all?"

His jaw dropped. "How can you say that? I can't believe the way you just took up with him, using him so that Draco wouldn't think you were still interested in me. And then Hermione used him, too! Really — I was rather disappointed in the pair of you. I do think you both owe him an apology. Asking him here for the holiday isn't going to make up for his heart being trod on by *two* girls he fancied..." To his horror, Ginny was grinning at him. "It isn't funny!" he said, appalled, making her grin even wider.

"Wait right here", she said suddenly, springing up and running to the door. Her cat watched her run off, then tucked her nose into her tail again, unconcerned. Harry frowned into the fire. *What on earth is going on here?* he wondered. He yawned suddenly, realizing how early it was and how tired he was.

A few minutes later, Ginny came springing back into the room. "I reckon we should tell you everything", she burred.

He stared at her. "We?" he echoed, not understanding. *Maybe I just need to be more awake to get what she's saying.*

"Right. I woke up Hermione, so —" Ginny turned around, looking very confused. She walked back over to the door and called into the hall, "Hermione! Where are you?"

"Coming..." came the faint whisper of Hermione's sleepy voice, accompanied by the sound of her feet, still in slippers, plodding down the steps. Ginny looked like she'd had several pots of coffee or tea. Hermione stumbled into the drawing room; Harry tried not to laugh, she was such a sight, from her bleary eyes to her wild hair and misbuttoned nightshirt, showing under her old frayed dressing gown, to her mismatched socks. (He knew the socks were no accident; she did it on principle, in honor of Dobby.)

He was feeling more awake, seeing her. He grinned. "Morning, Hermione. Sleep well?"

Her eyes had started to close again as she leaned against the door, and she opened one now and looked balefully at him. "You say something, Potter?"

He laughed, then stopped abruptly, clamping his mouth shut; he couldn't ever remember her calling him by his last name. She might have done, but he couldn't remember. "Nah. Not me", he finally was able to say, finding it harder and harder to not laugh out loud again.

Ginny was still bubbling over. "Wait here, Harry. I'll go up and get Neville now."

She was already sprinting out of the room again when Harry suddenly realized what she'd said. "Neville?" he said, horrified, getting to his feet. "You're going to wake him up at this hour to apologize? You'll just have to apologize for *that*!" he called after her, uncertain whether she'd heard him. He was too tired to run after her. Hermione staggered to the games table, where Ron had been playing Percy at chess the night before. She pulled out a chair and sat in it heavily, her eyes closing. A few minutes later, Ginny came running in again, her face glowing with excitement.

"Soon I think you'll understand why I'm so mad this morning. Oh, good; here's Neville."

Neville staggered into the room sleepily. He looked, if possible, less alert than Hermione. "Morning, Neville", Harry said softly, not trying to make any jokes this time. "Do you want to sit?" he added, pulling out the other chair from the games table, putting it next to Hermione's. Neville nodded slowly and staggered to the chair, sitting in it and sighing.

Hermione listed to the side and leaned her head on Neville's shoulder, closing her eyes. Harry looked quizzically at Ginny. He still wasn't certain that this was a good idea.

"Um — was it really necessary to get them out of bed this early?"

"But you've got to understand. I couldn't wait. It's just too bad Mariah isn't here —"

Now Harry was really baffled. "*Mariah!*"

Ginny grinned broadly. "Yes! It was all her brilliant plan, really. True Slytherin cunning."

Harry shook his head. "I think I need to sit, too." He turned an armchair so that their seats formed a small semi-circle and he sank into its depths. Ginny simply lowered herself to the floor and sat cross-legged, gazing up lovingly at Harry again.

"First of all, Neville — Harry and I are together now." She turned to Harry. "I told Hermione last night." She resumed talking to the other two. "I want to tell him about the plan. I also want to thank you for everything. You're the best friends I —"

"What bleeding plan?" Harry interrupted loudly. His noise seemed to wake Hermione up.

"God, Harry, don't you see?" she said, sounding a bit more disgusted with his cluelessness than she usually did. She spoke slowly, but Harry decided to assume that it was because she was tired rather than because she thought he was dim. "Mariah went to Ginny because she didn't think that Ginny —" she paused to yawn; "— wanted to be with Malfoy anymore. She was honest with Ginny and said that she *did* want —" yawn "— to be with him, and that they'd been carrying on. She said she was a selkie, but she'd never used that to get Malfoy. Since Ginny didn't want him, she should let him g-g-g-gooo", she finally managed to say, and then yawned hugely yet again.

Ginny went on as Hermione snuggled closer to Neville, making contented noises that Harry remembered meant she was about to fall asleep again. "So", Ginny said quickly, "I told her I'd do that in a heartbeat, but if I left Draco for you, there was no telling what he'd do. She agreed that that might be a problem and suggested we just sneak around. I explained to her about the amulets and showed her mine; she couldn't believe it. She told me about Slytherin and the family curse — she hadn't originally said that's why she's a selkie. She held my amulet and said she could see Draco. I told her I saw *you*, and that I was fairly certain Draco could see *me*, so there couldn't be any sneaking around while he had his amulet. She was surprised — she didn't know there was more than one, and she said whenever she'd been with Draco, he hadn't been wearing it." She made a face then, and Harry thought about her pride. "I reckon he might actually have felt guilty if he'd been wearing it while he was with *her*, and touched it and saw *me*..."

Harry put out his hand to her and she took it gratefully. Shaking herself, she went on. "Sorry. I'm being stupid. So Mariah and I talked and talked about how to handle the problem, and finally, she had an answer. She said she'd get the patrolling schedule changed so that she and you were on the same shift. She'd make a pass at you and I'd say I'd seen it in the amulet and then meet with the three of you and tell you all to sod off. That way, it would look like I was admitting to everything. Admitting to knowing about him and Mariah, and also the Muggle girl in the hedge maze. And not wanting to go very far with him because I was in love with you, and so on. Because of the amulet, I could bring up the part about seeing you and Mariah when I held it, and — this is the key — in front of

Draco, I could tell you off and make him think I wanted nothing more to do with you!"

Harry was baffled. "But wait — I thought the two of them were on different shifts because Ron and Hermione and I had this plan to catch Mariah and Draco, and —"

"Oh, it is, in part. Except that what you didn't know was that Mariah and I had recruited Hermione already, and when you and Ron started talking to her about *your* plan, she decided that if she switched the shifts, it would work for both plans — you'd think she did it because of what you had hatched, and Mariah could pretend to Draco that she didn't know about the switch, although she and Hermione and I planned it."

Harry was feeling a little hurt. "Why couldn't you tell me about all of this?"

Hermione opened one eye and looked at him sleepily, and not like she thought he was a genius, either. "I told her not to tell you. It was better for you not to know. You're not the world's best actor, Harry. You couldn't even bite your tongue when your Aunt Marge was insulting your dad. You couldn't pretend not to care, oh, no; instead you inflated her. Malfoy would have spotted it right away if you knew."

Harry was flabbergasted. He remembered the way Ginny and Mariah had been shooting daggers at each other during the confrontation in the anteroom — and they'd rehearsed it all! Planned every moment of it, practically. "So you knew that she was a selkie, yet you looked so shocked when —"

Ginny laughed. "I really made you think I didn't know! That's fantastic. I was worried about that. Mariah helped me practice my 'completely shocked and taken aback' look."

Harry picked his jaw up from the floor. "But", he finally managed to say, "what does all of this have to do with Neville?"

"Well", Ginny explained, "I was afraid Draco would suspect something and still think we were sneaking around, after the break-up, and try to catch us. We had to get the amulet away from Draco. The funny part about *Mariah* getting it, of course, is that *you* were the one to mention it first. I was going to say, 'Haven't you shown her your amulet, Draco?' But you saved me the trouble. That worked out so well..."

He frowned again. "But — Mariah seemed really hacked off when she saw you wearing it that morning, you know, when she —"

Ginny nodded. "We did that on purpose. She already knew, of course. We needed for both you and Draco to *see* that Mariah knew, so when she was on patrol with you, after she made the pass, she could say she knew I'd see the two of you in the amulet. If you didn't know that Mariah knew I had it, that wouldn't have worked. See?"

Harry's head was spinning. "Um, can we get back to Neville?"

"Wha —?" Neville said suddenly, sitting up abruptly, his shoulder hitting Hermione in the cheekbone.

"Ow —" she said slowly, putting her hand to her face.

"Oh, sorry, Herminninny", Neville said sleepily, putting his arm around her shoulder. She leaned on him again and they both closed their eyes, falling asleep again.

Ginny laughed softly at them. "Hermione's idea. She said I should talk to Neville, because he seemed like he had a bit of a crush on me, and he'd probably help. I explained to him that you and I wanted to be together, and I'd broken up with Draco, but I couldn't be with you yet because I was afraid of what Draco would do. So I asked him whether he'd mind pretending to be my boyfriend, to throw Draco off the scent. I said I'd understand completely if he didn't want to, since *he* could become a target — except that I think Draco doesn't usually take Neville seriously enough for that to happen right off —" She looked fondly at Neville. "He was so sweet. He kissed me on the cheek, and said, 'I couldn't imagine losing you to someone better than Harry Potter. And if it will make Draco Malfoy squirm to see you with me, I'm in. I've wanted to get Malfoy's goat for almost seven years. This'll be like a birthday and Christmas present rolled into one!'" She grinned. Harry looked at Neville, smiling and shaking his head. No wonder Neville seemed so happy to be with Ginny; in addition to at least being able to pretend to be her boyfriend, he was also able to live an old fantasy about getting the better of Draco Malfoy.

But Ginny wasn't done. "Then, after a while, I really did start worrying about Neville's safety. There was that ridiculous almost-duel, for one thing. Draco didn't act like it was nothing for me to be with Neville, as he did at first, and he definitely seemed like he was cooking up something. So Mariah suggested that, since Hermione was still trying to knock some sense into Ron, *she* should start seeing Neville, sort of 'stealing him' away from me. Then Neville wouldn't be my boyfriend any more and Draco wouldn't go after him, and maybe if Ron thought Neville and Hermione

were seeing each other, he might see sense and stop pushing her away. And *that* worked too!" she crowed.

Harry shook his head at Neville. "You're either the stupidest or the most selfless bloke I've ever met, Nev. But I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and say 'selfless'," Harry added, grinning at him. Neville had forced his eyes open now.

"Well, both jobs did have their fringe benefits. I can't really complain", he said, smiling in a sly un-Neville-like way. Harry remembered seeing him — and in Hermione's case, hearing him — snogging *both* girls at different points in time, and he had a feeling that he knew what Neville meant. Harry had been seething inside when he'd seen Neville with Ginny, but now he just thought, *How could I not have seen it? It was all an act.*

"If we try to get you a real girlfriend, do you promise to stay away from ours in future, Longbottom?" Ron demanded as he entered the room. They all looked up in surprise.

"Ron!" Ginny said half-guiltily, springing to her feet. "Did you hear —"

"Yeah, I heard everything. After Harry left our room, I wondered what was going on. Then I heard you get Hermione, and after that, Neville. After he went down, I went out to sit at the top of the stairs. Heard everything without a problem." He tapped his ear with his index finger. "Wolf hearing, you know. Rather convenient."

Hermione looked at him uncertainly, but he pulled her to her feet and kissed her soundly, then put his chin on the top of her head and looked at Neville. "I figured out pretty early what was going on, but thanks anyway, mate, for helping me see the light. And if you ever lay another finger or lip on her, I'll break both your arms, Longbottom."

Neville didn't flinch but smiled back tiredly at Ron. "Not a problem. Just see to it that you appreciate what you have in Hermione. Because if you don't make her blissfully happy, you'll have me to answer to."

"And me", Harry added, looking happily at his two best friends. Ginny crawled into his lap and put her arms around his neck.

"And you'll have to answer to all six of my brothers and my sister and parents if you don't make *me* blissfully happy", she said, kissing him on the cheek.

"And me as well", Neville added, standing. "But no pressure", he said quickly, grinning. They all laughed at that. Then, looking back and forth at

the two couples, Neville said a little wistfully, "You were saying, Ron, about getting me a real girlfriend..."

Both girls immediately abandoned Harry and Ron and threw their arms around Neville. "He's mine!" Hermione cried, grinning.

"No, you tart!" Ginny said in a squeaky mock-appalled voice. "Get off my man!"

Neville didn't look a bit displeased about their silliness though, and had an arm around each one of them. Harry gently gathered Ginny to him once more, saying, "Here, here. There are loads of *other* girls in the world..."

Ron also drew Hermione away, and she smiled up at him playfully. Neville made a great show of snapping his fingers and looking disappointed.

"And I was so enjoying having a harem."

They forgot how tired they all were as they burst forth into laughter again.

* * *

Harry was the last one to stumble out of the fireplace in the sitting room at Ascog castle. He threw himself onto one of the squashy couches between Sirius and Ginny, shaking his head. No one was laughing, or felt likely to any time soon. He usually quite enjoyed a Christmas dinner, but now he groaned, "I don't think I've ever felt more —"

"Oh, *god*, no..." Sirius agreed, running his hands over his face.

"— uncomfortable in my *entire* life", Harry finished. Hermione and Ron sat on the other couch with Neville.

Ginny was as red as her hair. Neville looked like he wanted to drop through a hole in the ground. Hermione and Ron, however, looked like their ire was up.

"I can't *believe* your mother reacted that way!" Hermione said to Ron, incredulous.

"*You* can't!" Ron said. "*I'm* the one with the mother living in the dark ages..."

Harry sighed and leaned back, closing his eyes, reaching for Ginny's hand and clasping it convulsively. Just when he was thinking Christmas was going to be absolutely lovely, a revelation had torn the Weasley family apart. It began with Molly Weasley arriving on Christmas day and

entering the kitchen, screaming loud enough to wake the dead when she saw her son's girlfriend and her very pregnant belly.

Harry and the other guests (other than Katie and Alicia, who'd already found out) had learned on Christmas Eve why Angelina was nowhere to be found the day before. Her second trimester was over, she'd said, and the babies were getting very uncomfortable for her to carry. She was having twins. Harry had been flabbergasted, then congratulated her and George and asked when the wedding was to be. After an awkward silence, they explained that they weren't even going to start planning a wedding until after the babies were born. The pregnancy wasn't an accident, but completely intentional, because they hadn't wanted to wait. With the war and the Diagon Alley attack and the Gringotts siege, they didn't want to postpone *life*. Angelina wanted a proper wedding with enough time (a year) to plan it; that would have meant postponing having a child (which had unexpectedly become two children) for almost two years. They decided to reverse the order of things instead: children first, then wedding. (Angelina insisted that this meant she didn't ever have to give birth again — "Two in one go", was how she'd put it.)

The thing that had most angered Mrs. Weasley was that it was *planned*. (She kept using the term "premeditated", and Harry could see that this was making Alicia very uncomfortable.) The only time Harry had heard her *screech* in quite the same way was when she had sent a howler to Ron in second year, after they'd taken the Ford Anglia. He had always assumed that the howler had amplified her voice. Now he knew that when she was *really* enraged, a facsimile like a howler couldn't come close to doing her justice...

The battle lines had been drawn. Percy, to everyone's surprise, had defended George and Angelina's decision. He'd known from the very start that they'd planned it and had encouraged them, saying that he wished he and Penny had had a chance to have a child before she was killed. "Well!" she'd replied, more than indignant. "I never thought I'd see the day that *you*, of all people, would completely forget decorum and — and respect for your parents!"

She stormed from the kitchen, her husband traveling uncertainly in her wake. Bill, Charlie, Maggie, Snape and Sirius had also come for Christmas dinner, and they left the kitchen as well, along with Ron, Ginny, Hermione and Harry. In the entrance hall, Molly paced, as though uncertain about the

next step. She muttered under her breath as the carol-singing Christmas ornaments on the hall tree added an inappropriately cheerful tone.

"*I just do not believe this.* That they would be so irresponsible..."

To Harry's surprise, Hermione stepped forward. "They're just worried, Mrs. Weasley. They want a family, but with everything going on —"

The next thing Harry knew, Molly Weasley was attacking *Hermione*, bringing up the Rita Skeeter article again, from the Tournament, and the Daisy Furuncle article from the summer, saying that when she and Harry had been sneaking around together they'd been playing Ron for a fool. Hermione looked like she was on the verge of tears but trying to hide this behind a furious façade; she stormed out of the room. Ron turned on his mother with fire in his eyes.

"You will *not* speak to Hermione that way, Mum! Now, I know that I'm a disappointment to you —" Mrs. Weasley suddenly put her hands out to Ron in appeasement. He brushed her off. "Don't try to make it up to me now. The letters you sent me when I was in hospital said it all. 'Try to find out if they have a cure now', you said. You're ashamed of me. You don't want a son who's a werewolf. Well, fine! You don't have to think of me as your son anymore, if you like. But George is still my brother and Angelina is going to have my nieces or nephews, or maybe one of each, so if you don't mind, I'd like to go have Christmas dinner with *my family*."

He stormed out as well. Charlie looked sheepishly at his mother and followed Ron, showing tacit agreement. Bill and Maggie went to their mother; Maggie put her arms around the small woman, tutting and comforting her.

Ginny looked at them with her hands on her hips. "You're not agreeing with her, are you?" she asked her sister and her eldest brother. Bill and Maggie looked uncertainly at Ginny, but it was Snape who answered.

"Never have I seen a more disgraceful display of disrespect toward a parent", he growled icily. "War or no war, this is still nominally a *civilized* society and *in* a civilized society one shows *respect* to one's elders."

"Is that what my sister shows to *you*? Is that what they're calling it now?" They all whirled; George had left the kitchen and was now standing in the entrance hall, giving Snape a piece of his mind. "Because you're — what? Twelve years older than her? Convenient, isn't it? She can't disagree with you or she's showing disrespect to her elder. Well, you're not a member of this family, *Snape*, so stay out of our family arguments. For

that matter, stay out of my house. That goes for all of you; if you don't like what Angelina and I are doing, you can leave and have your ruddy Christmas dinner elsewhere!"

George turned on his heel and returned to the kitchen. Harry was shocked. Ginny had tears streaming down her cheeks; Molly hugged her and said, "Come on then, love. I can fix up something for us back at the Burrow..."

But Ginny pulled back suddenly. "Erm, no, Mum. I'm staying here." She spoke very quietly and lifted her chin slightly. Her mother looked shocked. She turned to Harry. He stood shoulder to shoulder with Ginny.

Before she could say anything, he said softly, "I'll be staying as well, Mrs. Weasley." Sirius stood next to him with his hand on his shoulder, silent, but since he was there as Harry's godfather, it was clear that he wouldn't be leaving for the Burrow either.

Mrs. Weasley looked as though Harry had hit her and turned to her husband, who had been rendered utterly speechless until now. He put his arms around her and said, "Come along, love. We should go..." Mr. and Mrs. Weasley stepped into the fire after throwing the Floo powder, followed by Bill, Maggie, and finally, Snape, who looked pointedly at Harry and Sirius before disappearing into the green flames.

The meal that followed was a silent, grim affair, unrelieved by the slight amusement provided by the wizarding crackers. Sirius suggested to Harry that he, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Neville could come to Ascog after dinner, instead of waiting for the morning of Boxing Day, and they all jumped at the chance to leave the tension-fraught house.

However, leaving Hog's End didn't immediately lift their spirits. The silence in the sitting room at Ascog Castle was palpable. Sirius looked down and saw Harry and Ginny holding hands and said, "Harry, is there something you and Ginny would like to tell me?"

Harry looked at Sirius, then Ginny, and put his arm around her, smiling at his godfather, who, to Harry's dismay, did not look very happy for him.

"What?" Harry said, feeling rather hurt by Sirius' reaction. Sirius stood and walked to the mantle. When he turned around he looked a little happier, but Harry could still see concern behind his dark eyes.

"It's just that — yeah, I'm happy for you both. But don't go getting any ideas about shouting it from the rooftops. It was one thing when Hermione was your girlfriend — she was already targeted by Voldemort just for

being your friend. Just as Ron is. But Ginny — well, it would probably be a bad idea for anyone outside this room to know about the pair of you... Like Draco Malfoy."

Harry's mouth worked silently. "But — but —"

Sirius shook his head. "I know you're trying to become friends, but you *cannot* tell him. Absolutely not."

"Come on, Sirius —"

"Two words, Harry. *Obedience Charm*."

"But —"

"No." Harry had never felt like a small child being disciplined when he was with Sirius; he usually felt like an equal. But now he felt anything *but* equal.

Brilliant. That's the way to convince Draco I'm his friend... Start sneaking around with his old girlfriend, the one I said would probably never want to look at me again. Harry swallowed. "Well, *others* know. I think. Actually, we didn't make an announcement at Hog's End or anything, so the twins and Percy and the others may or may not know..."

Sirius waved this concern away. "I don't mean them. They're trustworthy. After all, they're —" He stopped suddenly, and Harry leaned forward, waiting.

"They're Ginny's family. Of course they're not going to tell anyone anything that could get her hurt."

"Er, yes. Right", Sirius said awkwardly.

"Maggie and Bill know", Ginny said quietly, gripping Harry's hand. "I told them when they arrived. You were in the kitchen", she told Harry. "But of course, they're also family. And Professor Snape knows as well, but he's working for Professor Dumbledore, and he's — he's with our sister. I trust him. I never had a chance to tell Mum and Dad, though; Mum went right into the kitchen when she arrived, and then the fight began..."

"Do the other girls know?" Sirius asked. "You know — Alicia, Katie, Angelina?"

Ginny looked thoughtful. "I'm not sure about Alicia. Katie knew months ago how we felt about each other, and she and Percy sort of — found us together yesterday. Just talking, mind you", she said quickly; Harry was trying not to turn red. He remembered that it hadn't been *all* talk. "And I told Angelina myself, yesterday, when I took some tea to her room. We visited for a while..."

Sirius looked thoughtful. "Hm. I hope Alicia doesn't know..."

Harry frowned. "Why?"

Sirius looked uncertainly at Ginny and Neville. "They don't know about her dad, do they?" he said to Harry.

Harry looked at them in turn. "There's no reason why they can't, is there?"

Sirius considered it for a moment, then nodded and gave them the short version of Alicia's father's plight. Ginny and Neville looked shocked by the tale. Harry frowned at Sirius again. "So why do you hope Alicia doesn't know about me and Ginny?"

"Because I'm not certain how truthful she's being about this whole mess..."

Harry was shocked. "You don't think Mr. Spinnet actually *did* it, do you?"

Sirius shook his head, pacing before the fire. "Oh, god no. But she is so *insistent* that Roger is innocent, and I just don't think we can afford to eliminate anyone as a suspect. Even her." Harry wondered whether that was why Sirius had been staying in Alicia's bedroom in his dog form. "Ambrose and Eve Davies are still perfectly healthy, and it's been over a week since Alicia came to Hogwarts. If someone was going to kill them by now, I think they would have done. Which strongly implies that Roger — if he did it — followed his orders to the letter. Plus — if Roger is the one who did it, that means he's not above sacrificing other people to protect his own family. That's why he became a Death Eater in the first place. And many people wouldn't blame him; it's like his family is being held hostage, after all. But still. If Roger's former contact managed to get to Alicia, and if she thought she could help her dad by giving up certain information, like Ginny being your girlfriend... And then there's still the possibility that she did it herself. And killed Roger. Or at least sent him off where he's in no position to provide her dad's alibi."

It was Hermione's turn to be shocked now. "You think she would frame her *own father*? Not to mention, she's Muggle-born. I've never heard of a Muggle-born Death Eater."

Sirius looked very gravely at them all. "On the contrary, Voldemort would probably be highly amused to be able to coerce a Muggle-born witch to do his will. And at any rate, Roger was working to protect his family. How do we know that Alicia isn't doing the same? In a way, her

father going to prison *could* be something that would protect him. Muggle prison would certainly get him away from the corridors of power at Whitehall. I'm starting to get a very bad feeling that Voldemort having infiltrated the Muggle government through Roger is going to be putting all of those people in danger, and Alicia might have looked on this as the only way to get her father out of office and to safety — even if it is prison. A desperate ploy, to be sure, but although the traditional way for an MP to lose his job was to be embroiled in a sex scandal, the public just don't respond to those in the same way these days. And who knows? She could have offed Roger herself, to make it look even worse for her dad..."

"Let me get this straight", Ron said, running his hand through his hair. "You've hired a lawyer for Alicia's dad even though you think *she* might have framed him? So we might have been eating Christmas dinner with a murderer?"

Sirius grimaced. "My theories change almost hourly, Ron. It's a huge tangle. Severus and Arabella, er, Professors Snape and Figg don't know what to think, either. And Albus has all of the operatives looking for Roger Davies now."

Harry was alarmed. "*All*? So this one thing has drawn everyone off from whatever they were already doing? Is that wise? What about Gringotts?"

Sirius shook his head. "Well, maybe not *all*. Most. Still, in that this has to do with some people with quite a lot of power in the Muggle government, it seemed prudent to pursue this before the trail grows cold. And most importantly, we have to determine what Voldemort's original goal was. I don't think Mr. Spinnet being elected was it. There's more to this..."

Sirius grimaced and rubbed his hand over his face. His mother appeared in the doorway of the sitting room, looking surprised. "Oh! Sirius! And Harry! Welcome home! I didn't realize you were all coming this evening. Happy Christmas, everyone!" Sirius forced himself to smile when he saw his mother and strode to her, his arms out.

"Happy Christmas, Mum. I think you remember Ginny, Hermione and Ron from the summer? And this is Neville Longbottom."

Ron went to the doorway so he could shake her hand and Neville did also; she clung to Neville's hand for a second, peering into his face. "Longbottom? Not Frank and Gemma Longbottom's boy?"

He nodded sheepishly and she grinned at him. "Gemma went to school with my girls! She and Ursula were quite the pair, you know. They almost had a falling out over who was going to get Frank..." She winked at Neville and he blushed; Harry imagined that he had never heard anything like this about his parents' youths.

"Well, no offense, but I'm rather glad that my mum was the one to get him", Neville said quietly. Callisto Black put her hand on his arm and smiled at him.

"Confidentially, so am I. I think Alan is a very good match for Ursula, and I think Frank and Gemma made a lovely couple." She looked sadly at Neville. "I'm so sorry about what happened..."

He nodded. "Thank you, ma'am", he said levelly, showing a maturity to which Harry was finally growing accustomed.

"Since you're all here, why don't you join the others down in the pool? Cass and Floyd are at his parents', but Ursula and Alan are downstairs enjoying themselves with Leo and Mercy. The children *are* a handful, though. I'm sure they wouldn't say no to some assistance..." Her eyes twinkled at them, crinkling up at the edges, and they couldn't help but smile back at her. Suddenly, the strife at Hog's End seemed very far away.

They all climbed the stairs to the rooms where they'd be staying. Neville went to Leo and Orion's room while Sirius went to his own room and Hermione and Ginny went to the guest room. After they were done changing into their swimming gear, Ron and Harry were descending the stairs again when Ron suggested they stop at Sirius' room so he could ask him something.

Harry shrugged and went along. Ron knocked, and after a few seconds the door opened. Sirius appeared, dressed for his swim. "Ready?" he asked them, grinning, clearly needing to release some tension with physical exercise.

"Well, actually", Ron said, his voice shaking for some reason, "I was curious about something. You said that *all* of the operatives were working on Mr. Spinnet's case. Does that mean that no one's looking for my other sister anymore?"

Sirius looked surprised. "Well, that's a good point. I'm sorry I forgot to mention that. I'm afraid we have to set priorities, Ron, and there haven't been any leads lately —"

"No, no, that's fine. I mean — I understand. Priorities and all."

Harry peered at him, frowning. *Since when did Ron not want his other sister found?* "You *do* want Annie found, *eventually*?" he said to his friend. Ron looked back at him blankly.

"Er, yeah. Of course. Not that today's Christmas dinner would exactly be a Weasley-selling point, of course. Good thing she didn't turn up while that row was going on. It was a ruddy civil war."

Harry was even more baffled. "Yeah, I suppose. Not that she *would* just turn up out of the blue. I mean, she doesn't remember anything about her early life, after all."

Ron clamped his mouth shut and looked at them both. He turned and left the room, calling over his shoulder, "Let's just go swimming", before descending the stairs. Sirius looked at Harry.

"What was all that about?" his godfather asked.

Harry shrugged. "No idea." He paused, then said very quickly, "About Draco Malfoy —"

"No."

Harry sighed. It was clear that Sirius wasn't going to change his mind.

They followed Ron down the stairs and were soon in the dungeons. When they made their way to the pool they found Sirius' sister Ursula and her husband Alan in the pool with nine-year-old Leo and seven-year-old Mercy. Mercy's almost-white eyes were as disturbing to Harry as ever. Ginny, Neville and Hermione had already reached the pool. Harry could see that Ron was disappointed that Hermione wasn't wearing the bikini from the photo she'd sent Harry from Corfu. Both she and Ginny were wearing conservative one-piece outfits in turquoise (Hermione) and purple (Ginny). Harry had a difficult time not staring at Ginny, for despite the fact that certain areas of her body were quite thoroughly covered, they *were* covered very *tightly* by the purple fabric...

Ron swatted him with the back of his hand; it hurt rather more than Harry would have liked. "Get a good look at my sister's bum?" Ron snarled under his breath.

Harry rubbed his arm. "Get a grip. If I'm not supposed to let on to 'outsiders' that there's anything between me and Ginny, you can't go into protective-brother-mode, either. The Piersons aren't to know about this, remember? The only couple amongst us is you and Hermione. Officially."

"Well, then you'll remember to keep your eyes on more *neutral* anatomy when looking at Ginny, won't you?" Ron hissed under his breath.

Harry sighed. *This was not going to be easy.*

They enjoyed being in the pool for a while, but as the evening wore on, Ursula and Alan decided to take the children up to bed. Sirius and Harry were lounging by the side of the pool when Harry asked him about what Rodney Jeffries was up to. Sirius hesitated for a moment.

"I don't mean to alarm you, Harry, since your aunt is with the organization now, but every time I go and spend some time with his people, it strikes me as more and more —"

"What?"

"Cult-like. Disturbingly so. And there are plans for a big gathering in the spring. Not sure where yet. It's to be outdoors, I know. A large venue. Designed to bring together as many people as possible. I'm trying to find out more."

They hadn't realized how close to them Neville was swimming. He swam to the edge of the pool and leaned his chin on his arms. "Did I hear you say Rodney Jeffries? He's brilliant, isn't he?"

Harry sat up, his eyes wide. "What? Why would you say that?"

"Well, he healed my Uncle Algie, didn't he? Aunt Enid, Uncle Algie and Gran always go down to Blackpool Pier for Bonfire Night, because, well —" He looked at the girls and Ron, to see whether they were listening. "Promise not to tell?" Harry and Sirius nodded, speechless. "They like to sabotage the bonfire. You know, since Guy Fawkes was a wizard and he was framed for the Gunpowder Plot..."

Sirius leaned forward. Harry remembered this vaguely from History of Magic; he knew it was yet another reason for Slytherin hatred of Muggles and Muggle-borns. A raucous Muggle holiday which had the burning of a wizard in effigy as its centerpiece. Harry had wondered why this holiday seemed to go unobserved by wizards when he'd started Hogwarts, but once he knew about Guy Fawkes being a wizard, it made perfect sense. "Go on", Sirius said to Neville.

"Well, Uncle Algie is, erm, a little — accident prone", Neville said, reddening. Harry tried not to laugh; it must run in the family. "Instead of putting out the fire in a way that no one would know who had done it, he set himself on fire. But before Aunt Enid or Gran could get to him — this Rodney Jeffries had healed him..."

Harry frowned. "I read a newspaper article about that. It said he'd healed a *young* man."

Neville shrugged. "Uncle Algie looks young for his age. He and Aunt Enid love Jeffries. Since October, they've been traveling with him, too. And so have some other witches and wizards. *Everyone* loves Rodney Jeffries..."

Harry thought of the vicar from Little Whinging, Mr. Babcock, and Dr. Forbes. Not *everyone* loved Rodney Jeffries. He was glad he hadn't publicized Jeffries healing his back.

"Er, that's great, Nev. Just great."

Neville went back to swimming and Harry looked quizzically at Sirius. *So. Witches and wizards even thought he was wonderful. The man who was healed was Neville's Uncle Algie. What now?* Harry wondered. But with Neville so close by, this wasn't the time or place to discuss Rodney Jeffries further, and Mr. Spinnet's case was more of a priority, anyway.

After they went back up to their rooms and prepared for bed, Ron asked Harry whether he could borrow some parchment and Hedwig to send a letter. Harry directed him to the desk and Ron sat down to write, the quill scratching on the parchment for some time. When he was done, Ron folded it up and wrote a name on the outside, then sealed the back with some purple wax Harry had in the desk. Once, when he'd been passing by on the way to the bathroom, while Ron was still writing, Ron had hurriedly covered the letter so that Harry couldn't see it. Harry had moved on, perplexed, but not wanting to let on to Ron that he cared.

Ron left to go up to the roof, where Hedwig was roosting, and Harry crept over to the desk; he felt the blotter lightly. There was an impression in it where Ron had been writing. He pulled out his wand and whispered, "*Crayonnaise*." The end of his wand was now tipped with graphite, like a pencil. Out of one of the desk drawers he pulled a piece of very thin tissue paper, for wrapping presents, and rubbed the end of the wand over it while it sat on the blotter. The words Ron had written emerged.

Harry stared. He could only make out part of it because the writing overlapped, but when Ron had been addressing the letter, he'd been leaning on a different part of the blotter. In spite of this, the name of the person to whom Ron had written the letter was partially overwritten by other things and all Harry could make out was "*Care of St. Mungo's Hospital*."

Ron was just writing to his doctor, Harry thought, returning his wand to normal, feeling vaguely guilty for spying on Ron. He crumpled up the papers and threw them in the dustbin, and after that he crawled into bed

and was already dozing off when Ron returned. They said goodnight to each other and put out the lights. Harry stared into the dark; something was disturbing him. He wasn't sure what it was. Something he'd seen out of the corner of his eye when he'd been doing the rubbings on the blotter...

When Ron was snoring loudly beside him, he crept from bed and gingerly picked up the dustbin from beside the desk, taking it into the ensuite bath with him. He fished the crumpled papers out of it and stared at each one, at the overlapping words and phrases. Finally, he found what he was looking for, what his mind had seen earlier, very briefly...

Ron was writing to someone at St. Mungo's, all right.

And it wasn't his doctor.

Innovations

Boxing Day dawned bright and clear. However, in his opinion, Harry shouldn't have *known* how Boxing Day dawned because he bloody well shouldn't have been *awake* at dawn.

Unfortunately, he was quite aware of how the day dawned because Hermione came tearing into his room wearing her dressing gown and nightshirt, shaking him and Ron awake and screeching hysterically. "Oh, god! I knew there was a reason why we shouldn't have come a day early! I just knew it, but I forgot yesterday because of the row with your mum!" she was ranting at Ron.

Ron and Harry sat up groggily and rubbed their eyes. Ron smacked his lips sleepily and Harry winced when he inhaled a bit of Ron's morning breath. "All right, Hermione, why shouldn't we have come a day early?" Ron ground out sleepily.

"It's Boxing Day!" she cried shrilly, making Harry cover his ears in pain.

"So?" he and Ron said in unison.

"The *elves*!"

"Ooooooh!" both boys responded, understanding now. When they had been planning to stay Christmas night at Hog's End, they were also planning to go back to the castle for Boxing Day. This year would mark the third time the new-old tradition had been observed. Hermione was usually the one running things, as it had originally been her idea.

"What do you mean *Ooooooh*?" she cried indignantly, her hands on her hips. "I'm on an island in the Firth of Clyde, miles and miles from the Grampian Highlands and Hogwarts castle. Boxing Day is *my idea*! How will it look for me to miss it? Hmm? How can I hold my head up after this? I'll be a laughing-stock."

At that, Ron burst out laughing, holding his middle. Harry was shocked; it wasn't like Ron to mock Hermione quite this badly, especially now that they were a "real" couple. "You *must* be joking", he managed to say with some difficulty, in the midst of his laughter. Hermione folded her arms across her chest and glared at him.

"I most certainly am not. What am I going to *do*?"

Ron put out his arms to her and said, "Come here", with an affectionate tone in his voice, smiling at her. She walked to him, still looking put-out, and he pulled her down to sit on the bed beside him, his arms around her. He kissed her temple gently and said softly, "What is your name?"

"What?" she said, frowning.

"Your name", he answered for her, "is Hermione Granger, the most brilliant witch I know, but a woman who *still* sometimes forgets that she *is* a witch. Bloody hell, Hermione, you just received your Apparition license, and even if you hadn't, you're staying in a house with a fireplace on the Floo network. Even Ginny and I, without licenses, can use the fire to get to Hog's End in a heartbeat, and then we can substitute our morning run for a jog to the castle from the village. There's no reason all of us can't be back at Hogwarts in plenty of time to scrub and cook and tie house elves' hands behind their backs so they can't clean anything. Don't worry, Hermione; you're not going to miss Boxing Day."

She sighed and slumped against him, then gave a small laugh. "I'm sorry, Ron. You too, Harry. You must think I'm mad. I do have an excuse, though. Maybe you'll identify, Harry..."

"Why not me?" Ron said, sounding a little hurt.

"Because you've always known you're a wizard. Harry hasn't. Anyway, the reason is — there are a lot of mornings when I wake up and fully expect to find out that the last six-and-a-half years have been a dream. The idea that I'm a witch still seems too good to be true sometimes, even with all of the things we've been through. Maybe in twenty years that will change, but I *still* don't wake up and automatically think, 'I'm a witch, so I can learn the geography of a place and think about it terribly hard and then just transport myself there in the blink of an eye using my wand'." She grinned at Ron. "I know it sounds stupid. You probably never experience that kind of madness..."

Harry smiled ruefully. "I kept *wishing* I would wake up and find it was all a dream when I was in my other life. The Slytherin common room, for instance, is one of the most depressing places on earth."

Ron nodded. "Yeah, I remember. It looked like Neville's toad had exploded in there, or spewed on everything. Dull green, sick green, olive green, puce, chartreuse... If there was an awful shade of green, it existed in that room."

"You were only in there once. I lived there for five-and-a-half years. Of course, I never reacted badly to it until the beginning of my sixth year. Before that, I didn't know how much nicer the Gryffindor common room was", he laughed.

They were all smiling now, and Ron kissed Hermione quickly on the cheek. "Are you all right now? Looking forward to Boxing Day? We'll be dressed in a few minutes and then we can eat breakfast and leave for Hogsmeade. And next time — talk to me before you start fretting, yeah?"

She nodded and kissed him quickly before leaving the room, a calm happiness on her face that made Harry smile. He went to his wardrobe for clothes, shaking his head.

"You're getting very good at handling her."

"Well, last year was especially good practice for that, since you were sort of missing in action even when you were in the same room with us. She fretted over you quite a lot."

Harry nodded. "Sorry about that. And — this probably can't be said enough — I'm sorry about the way I reacted to what you said at the Burrow, before sixth year —"

Ron waved the apology away, opening some drawers and taking out a pair of old jeans. "I told you, Harry. I was the one at fault there. I was incredibly tactless and had no business saying what I did, and it was largely self-interest. You were right to be upset."

"But even though it was tactless and said out of self-interest, you were also *right*. And I should have seen that and ended it with Hermione instead of dragging it out and then committing my own tactless maneuver and offering her to you as a birthday present."

Ron grimaced while he tied his old trainers. "Well, I'm not going to disagree with you there. That was *very* bad judgment", he said simply. "But it's all water under the bridge now. The three of us are still friends, *and* I've even learned a little tact, as you saw. If I can do it, anyone can", he grinned.

"That's true", Harry said, ready to duck, but Ron only pretended to hit him, also grinning.

"*Your* morning breath is no bed of roses, either. I could have said, before..."

"No, I meant — in first year, *you* were the one responsible for her running off and almost getting killed by a troll, because you made her so

upset she was crying in the bathroom. And then there was *Are you a witch or not?* when we were dealing with the Devil's Snare... This morning was a *huge* improvement over that."

"Yeah." Ron stopped with his hand on the knob and looked thoughtful. "Hermione and I talked about that last year. The crying-in-the-bathroom thing, I mean. And about third year, when I was so upset because it seemed Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers — too bad he didn't *really* eat Pettigrew, eh? She said she used to get very annoyed with herself whenever she reacted to my being upset with her. Over things like Crookshanks. And Krum, in fourth year. She kept telling herself that everything I said shouldn't *matter* so much to her, and she kept telling herself that it *didn't* matter."

Harry snorted. "The queen of denial, she is. Was. Anyone with *eyes* could see that it mattered a great deal to her. If you said a cross word to her, she was grumpy to everyone else all day. Even getting over one-hundred ten percent from Flitwick couldn't cheer her up. If you said something nice to her, she was all smiles." He shook his finger at Ron. "You shouldn't abuse that sort of power, you know."

"Yeah, well, her revenge was going to the Yule Ball with Krum. Thank goodness balls are the exception and not the rule at Hogwarts! That night *she* had the power to make *me* completely miserable..."

"I would say you returned the favor, with your talk of 'fraternizing with the enemy'. Oh, and you managed to make Padma miserable while you were at it. Two-for-one."

"She didn't *look* terribly miserable when she was out there dancing with Krum. And Padma met up with a nice boy from Beauxbatons."

"Hermione didn't look *thrilled* when you were having that row in the common room afterward."

He grimaced. "Can we not engage in any more reminiscences of what a prat I was?"

Harry agreed. "Fine. I'm not much better than you, frankly. I can't believe how much time I spent mooning over Cho when Ginny was right in front of me."

Ron made a face. "Let's go. Before you start telling me how wonderful my sister is. *Erg*."

Harry laughed. They stopped short when they opened the door and found Hermione and Ginny waiting for them. Harry felt a rather large

smile creeping across his own face upon seeing Ginny, and realized that he was the same way about her that Hermione had been about Ron. If she was cross with him, his day was ruined. One beatific smile, and the day was suddenly salvaged. He'd had it bad for a while.

They met Neville and Sirius in the kitchen for a quick breakfast before they went into the sitting room to use the Floo network. "A good rule to remember", Sirius had taught them, "is to only Apparate when necessary. If you don't need to Apparate, don't. There are always risks, and it's best to limit your use of Apparition if you can absolutely help it."

Glad to see that no one at Hog's End had awoken yet, they let themselves out the front door and jogged to the castle, Sirius running alongside them in his dog form. Neville brought up the rear, panting noisily, as the only one who was unaccustomed to early morning runs. They slowed down a bit, to be kind to him. Harry ran by Ginny's side; she turned and grinned at him, and he felt infused with an inner warmth. Turning his face toward the castle again, he decided that for once he was looking forward to Boxing Day and working side by side with her. He could think of far worse ways to spend a day.

* * *

As it turned out, Boxing Day meant listening to Draco Malfoy whinging about his destitute state all day. And about working.

"When I'm out of this ruddy excuse for a school", he grunted, carrying an armload of school robes down the stairs alongside Harry and Ron, "I'm going to do whatever is necessary to get rich again, and I will have house-elves waiting on me three-hundred sixty-five days a year. None of this Boxing Day nonsense. No more ruddy *manual labor*. I'm a Malfoy. I wasn't meant to be doing laundry and gardening."

"Yeah", Ron said, rolling his eyes and carrying a load of robes himself. "Because that's how it works. You want to be rich, and *bang!* You're rich. All the poor people in the world must *want* to be poor."

Draco Malfoy sneered at Ron. "No, you can't just *want* to be rich, Weasley. You have to *know* people. Contacts. You do favors for someone powerful, who will then do a favor for you. Reciprocity. It's how the world works. You choose someone — the *right* someone — to be indebted to you, and you can write your own ticket."

He seemed cheered by this thought and began whistling as he continued down the stairs to the school laundry, clutching the robes. Harry

and Ron stood still on the steps above him, looking at each other nervously. "What do you reckon he meant by *that*?" Ron whispered to Harry.

"Dunno", Harry said softly. "But *now* do you think it's a bad idea for me to try to be friends with him?"

They started moving again; Harry was having a difficult time not treading on the robes he was carrying. "Whatever you do, Harry", Ron said out of the corner of his mouth, "*don't turn your back on him.*" Harry nodded.

They had to duck to enter the laundry, as the doorway was only four feet high. Ron had to get on his knees *and* duck once he was crawling along the floor. He scattered robes as he moved, and once they were inside the laundry proper he was bending over, trying to pick up the dropped robes and dropping more each time. Harry sighed and put out his hand, saying, "*Accio*", somewhat lazily. Ron's last dropped robe shot into his hand and he added it to the pile he was carrying.

"Show-off", Ron grumbled. Harry grinned at him.

"We can't pop around the castle like the elves. We should have *some* advantages."

They delivered the robes to some younger students who were overseeing the huge vats where the clothes were being washed by magically churning machinery. On the far side of the enormous, noisy room, Hermione, Ginny and Zoey Russell were magically sorting the clean clothes, along with some students from other houses whom Harry did not know; they then used banishing charms to return the piles of neatly folded clothes to the proper dorms. There were chutes leading up to the dorms which the students never saw. Harry noted that the small door flaps were indicated by the house colors, with the appropriate year number painted on each door. There were twenty-eight in all, four rows of seven doors each.

Ron gave Hermione a kiss on the cheek when he saw her. "Impressive operation you're running here", he told her, as she waved her wand and sent a neatly folded pile of clothes zooming toward the small blue door with a "3" painted on it. "If you can do this with Banishing Charms, I'm assuming we could have been using Summoning Charms to get the clothes here. Why didn't you tell us we could do that?"

She raised her eyebrows at him and smirked. "Are you a wizard or not?" she said, looking like she was trying hard not to laugh. Ron laughed

instead, his blue eyes crinkling up, looking happier than Harry had seen him in a very long time.

"I reckon I deserve that", he said, still smiling as he gathered Hermione into his arms, a hungry look in his eyes that Harry recognized.

She colored, looking up at him lovingly, then hit him on the chest lightly, chiding him. "Why didn't you lot figure that out for yourselves? Especially you, Harry", she said, looking past Ron's arm at him and rolling her eyes. "I just saw you summon that robe Ron dropped, and without your wand, too. I'm not sure what *your* excuse is, Malfoy. Harry is at least used to hard work; I'd have thought you'd be lazy enough to think of it."

She gently separated herself from Ron and walked to the wall with the small doors; when her back was turned, Draco Malfoy made a rude gesture at her, to which Ron responded in kind. Hermione was oblivious to the pantomime behind her. "These chutes are something new I asked Professor Dumbledore about last year", she continued. "Since we have to move about the castle in conventional ways, I asked him whether we could have something like this to aid us. *Especially* as the school's ultimate goal should be to have a more diverse, *paid* workforce, including non-elves..."

Harry wasn't listening very closely to Hermione, however. He was gazing at Ginny, who was wearing rather close-fitting jeans and a white school blouse, open at the collar, with the sleeves rolled up. Her hair was caught up in a messy ponytail, tendrils of hair clustered humidly about her face, which was a bit flushed from the warm, moist air in the laundry. He smiled at her and she went on waving her wand over the pile of clothes before her. The shirts and jumpers folded themselves into neat rectangles, the sleeves tucked under, and they stacked themselves on the table before her. Without thinking, he strode toward her, smiling, and kissed her on the cheek, as Ron had Hermione. For a split second, she smiled, before a horror-struck expression took over her face, and then pure fury.

"*Harry Potter!*" she cried. "How dare you! What do you think you're doing?" She backed up and was pointing her wand at *him* now. He swallowed and looked sideways at Draco Malfoy, to see what his reaction was. Draco seemed to be glad that Ginny's wand wasn't pointing at *him*. "I thought I made it *very* clear how I feel about you!" she cried, her voice shaking just a little.

Her words reverberated in the cavernous room and Harry felt himself go very red. "I — that is, I didn't — which is to say — didn't think —" he

stuttered. It was true, he'd been an idiot. His problem was that when he saw her, he felt like they were the only two people in the world. At the moment, however, they were surrounded by other students who hadn't gone home for the holiday, students who were shocked that Ginny Weasley was not only telling off the Head Boy, but *Harry Potter*. The general population at Hogwarts had not been privy to what had occurred between her, Draco Malfoy, Harry and Mariah Kirkner, and the ones who were seeing this display now looked utterly shocked.

"Um", Harry struggled, "I'm sorry. Really. Not thinking", he said again.

"I could tell!" she said acidly, sneering at him. *Damn, Ginny*, he thought. *You're far too good at this. And I'm far too bad. No wonder I didn't get to know about the Great Plan...*

Ron looked at him sympathetically, then pulled him away from Ginny gently but firmly, whispering to him, "*You should probably go.*". He opted to stay behind in the laundry, to be with Hermione. Harry and Draco left to do other chores. After they ducked through the low, elf-sized doorway again, Harry was walking rather dejectedly. He felt very stupid. Draco slapped him on the back, shaking his head. "You're lucky she didn't hex you. What were you thinking, you git?" He almost sounded sympathetic.

Harry shook his head. "Dunno." But then he had a thought, an excuse. "For a moment — I think I forgot where and when I was. It seemed like I was back in my other life, when we were together..."

Draco nodded. "I wondered whether that was it. Your face looked kind of funny, like you weren't really *here*." Harry looked at him, smiling ruefully, feeling a pang because he was deceiving Draco, who was being so much like his old friend. Apart from calling him a git (which Draco had sometimes done in his other life in a friendly sort of way), he wasn't insulting him or accusing him of sneaking around with Ginny. Harry almost wished he *would*. He thought of Sirius forbidding him to tell Draco about him and Ginny. How would he ever forge a real friendship with Draco while keeping this secret from him?

After some floor-cleaning, (with more grumbling from Draco, although they both used their wands to control the mops) they were supposed to report to the kitchens, where lunch preparations were underway. Harry found Neville overseeing younger students while they waved their wands, making food fly here and there, into cooking pots and ovens and onto cutting boards, where knives chopped the vegetables, metal

flashing. Harry steered cautiously around the unmanned cutlery, going to Neville.

"Oi, Harry! Good. We have a problem. Our summoning charms aren't working on the root cellars. Maybe. Either something magical is down there preventing the food from coming up when we need it, or we've actually run out of potatoes, carrots, turnips and onions, which seems unlikely. I think it might be a boggart. Could you check into it? I wouldn't trust the younger students to try to keep their heads when confronted by a boggart. These are mostly first and second years."

Harry smiled at him; Neville was very much in charge, confident and sure. Draco scowled at him and started to follow Harry. Neville put his hand on his chest, stopping him. "You stay here, Malfoy. I have some other work for you."

Harry tried very hard not to laugh; Neville was clearly enjoying ordering Draco Malfoy around. *Well*, he thought; *that's what we get for not volunteering to be in charge of anything in particular. We get ordered around all day.*

Draco's scowl deepened. "What, you think I can't handle a stupid boggart, Longbottom?"

Neville looked at him levelly. "Yes", he said simply, not bothering to give any reason. "*You* can mash potatoes", he said, nodding at some pots on the stove with clouds of steam over them. "Be careful when you drain them", he said. "You can get some nasty burns just from steam." A smile played around the corners of Neville's mouth.

Harry forced himself to appear sober again when Draco looked at him; he shrugged and gave Draco a sympathetic look before proceeding to the steep stairs leading down to the root cellars, bracing himself for the coldness inside that he knew that he would feel when the boggart drew near to him and sensed his fear of dementors. He remembered going down to the root cellar to do the very same thing in his other life, when his dad was teaching them to handle boggarts in Defense Against the Dark Arts.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and still hadn't felt the wave of cold. Harry walked slowly, cautiously, with his wand out, then stopped and swallowed. What if it wasn't a boggart? What if it was something he'd never encountered before? Who knew what strange things were living in the bowels of the castle? No one had suspected that a basilisk had been living in a secret chamber for a thousand years.

He opened the door to the potato storage and stood back cautiously, peering into the dark. Nothing happened, so he started to close the door again; when a soft thud was heard in the depths of the room, he froze. *Get a grip, Potter*, he told himself. *Use your head*. He whispered, "*Lumos*," and held up his wand, sending a soft glow into the blackness. Standing on the other side of the room, flattened against the wall, surrounded by sacks of potatoes, was Ginny.

Ginny! he thought. *Am I so afraid of Ginny now that boggarts don't turn into dementors anymore, they turn into her?*

She leaped forward and threw her arms around him; she felt warm and solid, and he didn't know what to do. He didn't feel like laughing, so how could he banish her with a cry of *Riddikulus*?

"Oh, good!" she said, her mouth very close to his. "Neville managed to get you to come down here. Isn't he a good friend? I'm — I'm so sorry about what happened in the laundry earlier, Harry. This is how I really wanted to respond —"

And then she was pressing her lips against his, and he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was no boggart, but Ginny, *his* Ginny. He liked being able to think of her that way now. He was still a little awkward, having been bracing himself for a dementor, or a boggart, at the very least, and she could tell that he wasn't relaxed yet and pulled her face away from his, putting her head on his shoulder and tightening her hold around his waist. "Poor Harry", she said, sniffing a little. "I didn't mean to embarrass you in front of everyone. I was just so surprised when you kissed me, with Draco there and all. At least I didn't have to lie", she said with a sly smile. "I *did* make it clear how I feel about you, at Hog's End..."

He put his finger under her chin and lifted it slightly. He brushed his lips against hers, once, twice, three times, before tentatively reaching out with his tongue and tracing the crease between her lips, which opened in answer to his silent question, admitting him with a soft moan that thrilled him. He was holding her tightly now, kissing her deeply as she responded, the moaning a constant now in the back of her throat. Her hands against his back pressed him to her firmly, and he held his left hand in the small of her back, tracing her spine lightly through her blouse, while his other hand slid down and cupped her bottom tenderly, pulling her against him. She sighed into his mouth and squirmed against him deliciously as the hand on her bottom moved in light circles. He remembered, when he'd seen her

behind Hagrid's hut with Draco Malfoy on her fifteenth birthday, that she'd been trying to keep Draco's hands away from certain parts of her body. She did nothing about his hand now.

However, thinking of Draco Malfoy made him remember that he was in the kitchen with Neville, and that he was trying to be Draco's friend. That thought had a slightly chilling effect on him, and he pulled back from her, gazing down at her eyes, dark with passion. She looked searchingly back at him, one eyebrow raised.

"Is everything all right, Harry? Why *did* you kiss me in the laundry, anyway?"

He drew his lips into a line, gently pushing her hair out of her face as he spoke, then stroking the side of her face with his fingers, making her shiver. "I told Draco it was because I temporarily forgot where and when I was, that I thought I was back in my other life for a moment. He seemed to buy it. Now that I think about it, I'm not so sure that's *not* what happened."

She kissed his chin lightly. "Perhaps it will prove useful after all that he knows about that now. He didn't get upset?"

Harry shook his head. "No. He asked me what I was thinking and called me a git. But — maybe that's why I felt a little confused. Sometimes *he* really *does* seem like that other Draco now." He sighed. "I wish Sirius hadn't said he can't know about *us*. If I'm really going to be his friend —"

She backed up from him and shook her head. "I agree with Sirius, Harry. Yes, at first I was terribly glad that you were making friends with him, in case that meant he'd be happy for us, eventually. But he's been giving me these strange looks lately that are a bit unnerving. Tell me, has he given you any reason to believe he'd react well to being told that we're together? Has he said, 'If you and Ginny become a couple, I will be thrilled for you and promise not to hex you or find a way to deliver your head on a platter to You-Know-Who?' Because if he has, maybe we should talk to Sirius. Maybe he's wrong about Draco."

"Draco would say 'the Dark Lord'." He sighed. "No, he hasn't. He said that he didn't know what he'd do, that he was being honest about that. He doesn't know and he said he wouldn't be responsible for his actions..."

"*He doesn't know*", she repeated, shaking her head again. "*Not responsible?* That doesn't exactly sound like *You have my blessing*."

"No, it doesn't", he agreed reluctantly. "Sirius is probably right", he admitted, not happy about this. He was also not at all happy about the fact that it felt like Draco was in the room with them. "Plus, I don't want Voldemort to find out what you mean to me and to —" He couldn't say it; the idea of Voldemort getting anywhere near her was too horrid. He cupped her cheek in his hand and gazed at her dear, dear face, just as Sandy hissed at him. He sighed; he knew exactly what she meant, but he couldn't stop gazing at Ginny.

Her voice caught, and she said softly. "Oh, Harry, when you look at me that way —"

"Draco and Neville will be down here in about a minute", he said. "But first —" He leaned forward and breathed warmly in her ear, nipping her earlobe between his teeth. Her sharp intake of breath was beautiful; he slid his lips down her neck, aching to hear more, drawing a small bit of skin into his mouth for a moment, tracing upward to her ear with his tongue again while she moved her hands to his waist once more, and then *Oh, god*, he thought, groaning, as one of her hands moved further down, cupping his bum in one of her small palms the way he had done with her earlier...

"Harry! You all right down there?"

"He'll be fine, Malfoy! Get back to work!"

Harry sighed; while he had been kissing Ginny, he had been vaguely aware, in the back of his mind, that the creaking sound overhead was the old rusty hinges on the door leading to the stairs to the root cellars. As Sandy had announced, Draco and Neville were coming.

"You're a cold bastard, you know that Longbottom? You think the whole school didn't hear about his boggart turning into a dementor, in third year? You know what those things do to him."

"Yeah, and because you knew, you and your Slytherin toadies impersonated dementors and almost killed Harry during a Quidditch match. Don't act so concerned now. Harry's perfectly capable of conjuring a Patronus, Malfoy. I saw him do it at the end of third year, when Lupin tested us, during our O.W.L.s, and last year, when we were repelling Lethifolds. Let him be."

But Harry heard something in Draco's voice that bothered him. Why was he so determined to come down? Was it really that he wanted to make sure Harry was all right?

Harry backed up from Ginny and pulled out his wand. Pointing it at the sacks of potatoes, he cried, "*Expecto Patronum!*" with his face turned toward the door, to project his voice into the corridor.

He wasn't very focused, so only a small wisp of a stag flew from his wand-tip. He followed that by crying very loudly, "*Riddikulus!*"

Ginny quickly grabbed a stick of wood in the corner and tried to snap it, but it was too thick for her. Harry took it and lifted his leg, then snapped it across his thigh, producing a loud *crack!* not unlike the sound of a boggart being banished. He quickly pulled Ginny to him and kissed her on the mouth once more before stepping into the corridor again and slamming the door shut, only to find himself face to face with Draco Malfoy.

Harry couldn't tell what to make of the expression on Draco's face. Was it concern? Suspicion? Neville stood at the bottom of the stairs, red-faced and panting. "I tried to keep him away, Harry, but he wouldn't listen." Neville looked quite frightened, as though he had made an unforgivable blunder.

Harry shook his head. "Don't worry about me, either one of you. Your potatoes should come when summoned now, Neville. Never fear."

Neville snorted. "Easy for you to say. Your boggarts don't turn into Snape."

Harry smiled at him. "Actually, I'll bet yours don't anymore, either. You shouldn't be afraid of Snape, Neville. He's all right. I'm just glad we got him back, after last year."

Neville shrugged. "I reckon you're right. It's probably more likely now that my boggart would turn into Pa —" He stopped and colored, looking in Draco Malfoy's direction.

"Oh, come on, Longbottom. Don't stop now. You'd deprive me of knowing what your greatest fear in the world is, now that it's not my head-of-house? Not very sporting of you, is that?"

Neville didn't look young and wide-eyed anymore; he smirked at Draco. "And what would *your* boggart turn into, Malfoy?"

Harry thought back to the boggart lesson in his other life. What *had* Draco's boggart turned into? When he remembered, he laughed, holding his middle. Neville and Draco stared at him. "What's wrong with you?" Draco drawled.

"I know what your boggart would turn into!" he crowed, unable to stop his laughter. Draco Malfoy glared at him with his arms crossed.

"Oh, you *do*, do you?"

Harry nodded and smiled, then whispered to him, so Neville wouldn't hear, "*A cat.*"

Draco backed up from him, swallowing. "Yeah, well, plenty of people are — I mean, I'm not the only one in the world who —"

Harry laughed. "That's all right. Let's go back upstairs."

He led the pair of them away from the potato storage, while Neville bounced on the balls of his feet and begged, "Oh, come on, Harry! Tell me what he's afraid of —"

"Never mind", Harry said; he whispered to Draco again, saying, "*Don't worry; I won't tell him.*"

Draco Malfoy frowned a little, as though Harry was a puzzle he hadn't yet figured out. "Good", he said, not sounding completely convinced. "Glad to hear it."

Nonetheless, Neville continued to beg until they were back in the kitchens and after that, they were all too busy to do anything but prepare lunch for the elves and the students and staff who had stayed at the school. He suggested to Draco that they take some tea up to Mrs. Figg, in the staff wing (so that poor Ginny could emerge from the root cellar and eat some lunch). Draco glared at Neville for a moment as they left the kitchen.

* * *

The six of them returned to Hog's End after tea, so they could Floo back to Ascog. They were exhausted from a day of hard work, even though much of it had been executed using magic. Doing spells for hours on end wasn't exactly relaxing, because of the mental energy put into it. Harry was glad he wasn't going to be trying to Apparate to Ascog, since he was afraid he'd wind up in the Firth of Clyde, instead of on the Isle of Bute.

When they let themselves into the entrance hall at Hog's End, they found a rather different family scene than the one they had experienced on Christmas day. Mrs. Weasley was hugging George to her. George looked as though she was choking him, but he didn't try to extract himself. She was crying and saying, "I'm so sorry, George! I don't mean to be so old-fashioned... I just never thought I'd become a grandmother before I became a mother-in-law... I'm here for you and Angelina, never you fear. The poor lass doesn't have to go through this alone..."

"She doesn't have to go through it alone, Mum because she has *me*", George grunted as she continued to hold him, "and Fred and Percy, as well.

Plus Lee."

She finally released her hold on him and he stopped turning blue. "Oh, pish. You're just a bunch of *men*. She needs a woman around, someone who knows about childbirth and babies. Where is the mother-to-be of my grandchildren? We have so many plans to make! Is she upstairs?" George nodded, his hand at his throat. She turned her head and finally spotted her youngest children, along with Harry, Hermione, Neville and Sirius. "Oh, hello, you lot. Had a good day? Can't talk now; too much to do." She turned to George. "This will be thirsty work. Make yourself useful and bring us a pot of tea. And the knitting! I've so much knitting to do!" She shook her head over the extent of the preparations that would be required before Angelina gave birth. Gathering her robes in her hands, she began to climb the stairs. Harry and Ron looked at each other quizzically; Harry noticed that Hermione and Ginny looked rather smug.

"I didn't think it would take long for her to come around", Hermione said quietly, watching Mrs. Weasley go.

"That's Mum", Ginny said, nodding. "Now that all of us are out of the house, for the most part, since Ron and I are practically never home, she's been a bit at loose ends. This will give her plenty to do. If there's one thing Mum can't resist, it's babies."

Ron rolled his eyes. "As if they couldn't have worked *that* out, Ginny", he said, nodding at the others. "No, she had nine kids because she really didn't *care* for babies..."

George slapped Ron on the back. "Yeah, well, after Fred and I it's amazing she ever had more", he said, grinning.

Ron did not grin back at him, however. "I know I defended you yesterday, but you might have told Mum about this sooner and not ruined the holiday for everyone. What were you thinking?"

George looked a little sheepish and shrugged. "I reckon we knew that Mum would react that way at first, and were putting it off as long as possible. We also knew she'd come around pretty quickly."

"Still", Ron said, looking like he wanted to hit George, just for a moment. "You do realize now that she'll be underfoot every moment of the rest of the time Angelina's expecting? And even more after the kids are born?"

Fred put his hand on George's shoulder and grinned. "I don't think George was afraid of the row. I think he was afraid of the peace treaty

after. He knew there'd be no keeping Mum away once she knew she was going to be a granny. *That's* what he was putting off, if you ask me."

"Geroff, you", George grumbled, although he was smiling at his twin a little. "You're also going to have to live with Mum over here morning, noon and night."

Fred shrugged. "Yeah, but she won't be paying any attention to *me*, will she? Angelina's going to be taking the brunt of it."

Ron poked George in the ribs to get his attention. "How about Bill and Maggie? Has everyone made up again? Or do we all continue walking on eggshells?"

George shrugged. "I think we're all okay. Except for Percy. Somehow — he hasn't forgiven Mum. I've never seen those two on the outs before. Very weird. I hope they settle it soon. He was the first one to see her arrive and went storming out of here. I think he's in the office now", George said, meaning the large dining room which was no longer used for dining but as the center of operations for Weasley Wizard Wheezes, Limited. "I can't take being her golden boy", he added, shaking his head. "You know — the first one to pop out kids. With Angelina's help, of course", he said quickly, seeing Hermione's expression of indignation. "That's supposed to be Percy's job: being Mum's pet. Too much scrutiny for me, thanks. I wish he'd just apologize to her already."

"I should apologize to her as well", Hermione said, looking a little pink. "I probably overreacted", she added softly.

Ron put his arm around her shoulder. "You and Percy are a right pair. What do you think *she* did? Write her a nice letter. You'll be fine. Anyway, I'm knackered and can't think about this anymore. We're going back to Ascog", he told the twins, "and we'll see you at the match tomorrow."

Fred and George nodded. "Right!" Should be a good one!" Fred said. "But — George isn't going", he said, looking at his twin wistfully. It seemed so strange to Harry that the twins' lives were diverging this way.

"Keeping Angelina company", George explained shortly. "Or rather, since she can't go, I'm not going to be able to lord it over her if *I* don't go. Madam Pomfrey said she'd probably spew all over if she went spinning through the Floo network, as her stomach has been very delicate all through this and Pomfrey was very cross with her for *losing* weight about a month ago, because so little of what she ate stayed inside her. Broomsticks are out of the question, and so's Apparition. I think even a

Portkey would jostle her about too much, so she's not going anywhere. I keep thinking we need to coax Dad's old car out of the forest, see if it's still working. That would have been just the thing for this."

Hermione glared, her hands on her hips. "It's *only* completely illegal."

George shrugged. "If I was caught I could throw myself on the mercy of the court." He put his right hand over his heart and affected a melodramatic air. *"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, it was to take the mother of my unborn children to a Quidditch match, the last bit of fun she would have had before beginning the thankless task of raising twins..."* He put the back of his other hand to his brow and closed his eyes as they all laughed.

"And our mum knows just how thankless that is, eh?" Ginny said through her laughter.

"Sorry you aren't playing in the European Cup final, Harry", Fred said when they had sobered a little.

Harry brushed away the comment. "That's all right. I get to see the final, at least. I've been looking forward to it. Thanks for the ticket."

"And thanks for the ticket for me, as well!" Neville added. "I never thought I'd get to see the European Cup before finishing school. And I reckon that even after I'm out of school my gran will have things to say about what I do in my spare time."

They laughed sympathetically, and George said to Neville, "You know, I think I'll take our mum over your gran anytime. No offense."

Neville shrugged, smiling. "None taken."

The twins saw them off, waving as each one stepped into the green flames and said, "Ascog Castle!" very clearly, to prevent any Floo mishaps. Harry stumbled out of the fire in the sitting room at Ascog and quickly moved out of the way for Sirius, who was coming last. Callisto and Walter Black were there waiting for them all to return, but since they'd had their tea at Hogwarts, they were going directly to bed. It had been a long day and they didn't know how much time the match would take. It was to start at nine o'clock in the morning, but Harry knew there was a chance it could last for several days. He hoped that wouldn't happen, though, as he was hoping to have *some* time alone with Ginny before they went to Sweden for the broom race — without her — on New Year's Eve.

They said goodnight to Neville and Sirius, and when the four of them had reached the top floor, Ron pulled Hermione into Harry's room, saying

"We're just going to say goodnight for a moment. The pair of you can do that, also, but *stay on the landing*."

Ron slammed the door; Harry frowned at it. *Stay on the landing*. Who did he think he was? But he didn't have time to ponder this as Ginny was pulling him to her, and he had no thought for anything but holding her, kissing her, listening to the sweet gurgling sound in the back of her throat as she wrapped herself around him and he held her trembling body in his arms... He pulled back from her for a moment and said against her mouth, "I love you so much Ginny. So much..."

He held her face in his hands and kissed her cheeks and brow, while she answered, "I love you, Harry..."

They heard a throat being cleared ostentatiously and looked up in surprise, finding Ron and Hermione standing in the doorway of Harry's room, Ron holding his fist before his mouth to assist him in his mock-coughing. Harry stepped away from Ginny, then turned to Ron with his eyebrows raised. "As commanded", he said somewhat snidely, "we stayed on the landing."

He walked past Ron and Hermione and into his room without looking at them, wishing he didn't have to be apart from Ginny for a single moment, but resigning himself to another night with Ron, whose werewolf hearing made any sneaking about after bedtime completely prohibitive. It was very nearly as annoying as Draco Malfoy having one of the basilisk amulets. He sighed as he brushed his teeth and changed his clothes. Oh, well. At least Neville helped them sneak around a little, although Harry wasn't keen on going back to the root cellar. He could think of far nicer places to be alone with Ginny. Somehow, when he pictured being with her, sacks of potatoes had never been part of his fantasy.

* * *

Charlie was friends with the Romanian Seeker and had wangled permission for Ginny and Ron to take the Floo network to a fireplace in the office being used for the Romanian team at the castle. A Portkey for Ginny and Ron was out of the question, as the nearest one was leaving before dawn from Wemyss Bay, well before the first ferry arrived there from the island. Harry, Hermione, Neville and Sirius were Apparating.

When Harry could feel his body again, he saw that he had successfully arrived in the small copse of trees near the castle that had been his goal; it was the designated Apparating area, heavily guarded by Aurors. Harry was

surprised to see Katie there. It was odd to see her working at her new job when he was there for fun. She regarded him impassively in front of her colleagues, but winked at him surreptitiously after he had passed, flashing him a smile and whispering to him, *"Enjoy the match. I didn't expect to be working today — last minute thing, you know. With luck I'll get to see some of it."*

Once they had passed through security, they were able to show their tickets at the gate and enter. On the way up to their seats, they bought small flags and programs. They'd brought both wizarding and Muggle money, not knowing which would be accepted, and ended up paying in pound notes. Harry's nostrils flared; there was a very strong odor in the castle that he couldn't place; it seemed to be everywhere, and he wondered whether Ron was bothered by it, with his acute sense of smell. Harry also noticed a lot of people standing about having talking while holding wands that were abnormally fat and sharp.

After making their purchases, they continued climbing upward and quickly found Ginny and Ron, already in their seats in the stands on top of the castle wall, behind the parapets. Fred and Charlie were there as well, with Percy (who wasn't working, evidently), Alicia, Bill, Oliver Wood and Oliver's older brother, Alex, to whom Harry and the others were introduced. The odd smell did not dissipate once he was up in the fresh air again.

Harry forgot about this, though, as he looked around the pitch excitedly; he now knew what it was like to play two matches on this pitch, and he waved to Jean-Claude Jones as the French Seeker flew about, getting in some practice. Jones grinned back at Harry, evidently bearing no grudge, and Harry waved his small French tri-color enthusiastically. He bore no grudge either — not toward Jones, at any rate.

Charlie, on the other hand, was flicking back and forth a small *Romanian* tri-color (blue, yellow and red instead of the French blue, white and red) and waving to the Seeker on *that* team. He explained to Harry that he knew her from his work with dragons. Her name was Natasha Lemnaru; her parents were both dragon-handlers and she'd grown up on the reservation in Romania. Now she was following in her parents' footsteps — when she wasn't playing Quidditch.

"Bloody brilliant flyer", Charlie enthused. "After I told her about your maneuver with that Horntail, she's insisted there's no better way to control

dragons than from a broomstick. You may have revolutionized dragon handling, Harry", he grinned at him. Harry looked at the Seeker. She had flashing black eyes and long raven hair she'd pulled back into a ponytail that whipped around like a heavy rope as she flew. Her nose had a little bump on the bridge, and for a moment Harry wondered how closely related to Bulgarians Romanians were; she seemed almost like she could be a sister of Viktor Krum. She winked cheekily at Charlie; Harry wondered just how good a friend she was.

The roar of the crowd increased as Ludo Bagman appeared in the top box and cast the *Sonorus* spell to amplify his voice. He welcomed them all to the European Cup Final for 1997 and introduced the two teams.

"*I give you Antonescu, Bratiano, Lazar, Lemnaru, Negrea, Radescu and Valsan!*" he cried, as the Romanian team zoomed down the pitch to raucous cheers from their supporters, including Charlie. Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Percy also had Romanian flags and were cheering the Romanians, who wore vivid blue jerseys and trousers with red robes bearing the Romanian coat of arms: a large golden eagle holding a sword and scepter in its claws, a cross in its mouth, and a shield with too many small things on it for Harry to make out while they were traveling so fast. He pulled out his program and looked at it there instead.

Then Ludo Bagman was announcing the French team. "*Devereux, DuFresne, Fourcade, Jones, Laroche, Laroche and Pierpont!*"

As the French team took their turn showing off, Harry leaned behind Hermione and said to Ron, "*Laroche and Laroche?*"

Hermione shoved her program in front of him. "It says here that they're married. Clarice and Thierry Laroche. And they're both Chasers."

Harry nodded without looking. He turned to Ginny and gave her a small smile, hoping this would be considered subtle enough that Sirius wouldn't shout at him later. Ginny gave him a small smile in return and then turned her head away, reddening slightly. He picked up his Omnioculars (he'd taken the precaution of finally erasing the footage of Draco and Mariah), recording the match so that George and Angelina could see it later.

It was time for the mascots now, and France was going first this time. Harry had to laugh. *They were garden gnomes!* Then something else appeared on the pitch and Harry stopped laughing, as did everyone else present. There were two large ogres standing at each end of the pitch, one

in front of each center goal. Some nervous-looking wizards were fastening chains to the bottom of the goal posts; each chain led to a large metal collar around each ogre's neck. And then the gnomes were actually running up to the ogres of their own accord and the ogres were *hurling* the small creatures the length of the field, where the opposite ogre had to catch them. Harry laughed in spite of himself, still feeling a little nervous about the ogres. The gnomes actually seemed to enjoy it (they pulled very silly faces and did a lot of posing as they were flying through the air). Even Hermione, whom he would have expected to be outraged over this treatment of the gnomes (she was never very keen on the way they denigrated the garden at the Burrow) found it amusing enough to laugh.

"Why, they're like little acrobats!" she exclaimed appreciatively, watching a gnome cleave the air, intentionally flipping over and twisting around as he hurtled toward the other ogre. "But I do hope they keep those ogres in check. They eat babies, you know."

Ron was holding his sides, laughing, watching the flying gnomes. "No wonder they don't seem to mind when we fling them over the privet, and come back for more!" he grinned. "Should have realized they *enjoyed* it, the little buggers! And it figures that things as annoying as gnomes would come from France..."

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed, scandalized. "I'm surprised at you! That's very xenophobic. Gnomes have been here for quite some time now. They came over on ships with the Normans..."

Harry squinted at her. "Are you telling me that garden gnomes came to Britain with William the Conqueror?"

She sniffed. "If you two wouldn't treat History of Magic as *naptime*..."

Harry and Ron grinned at each other over her head. "But those desks are so *comfortable*, Hermione", Ron said by way of explanation, putting his arm around her and squeezing gently. In spite of herself, she smiled back at him. The gnomes were standing around the pitch now, taking their bows to thunderous applause, while the ogres were being led away again by their handlers.

The Romanian mascots were far more sinister than gnome-throwing-ogres, however. After the gnomes trooped off, a number of people in the stands started pulling out massive necklaces of garlic and sharp wooden stakes. Harry was now able to place the odd odor he'd detected upon entering the castle, and he realized that the fat, sharp wands weren't wands

at all. The other spectators seemed to know what was going to happen and had come prepared — but for what? However, after a moment's thought, Harry realized what sort of creatures were probably serving as the Romanian mascots. Sirius was sitting behind him and he turned to his godfather with concern.

"They wouldn't — would they? But — it's daytime."

Sirius looked up. It was a flat white winter sky, with solid cloudcover stretching from horizon to horizon. "No direct sunlight today, Harry, as during most of the winter this far north. You should probably at least pull out your wand, just to be on the safe side."

Harry did this just as a Romanian official, covered, it seemed, in heads of garlic, tentatively approached a large wooden box sitting in the middle of the pitch and unlatched it, stepping back quickly with his wand drawn. The top of the hinged box was flung back violently as a flock of pitch-black bats emerged, moving as one being, spreading out and forming the image of a larger bat, which then rose high above the pitch and swooped over the crowd. Harry was strongly reminded of his stepfather's Patronus, which had saved him from the dementor's kiss in the courtroom. While this made him miss Snape momentarily, he was also glad he had not come to the match; the presence of so many people wearing garlic would probably have sent him into a fit.

The large bat that was composed of so many smaller bats broke up then and the individual bats flew, still in formation, over the crowd on the upper deck. People ducked and waved their garlic or stakes in the air. Harry wasn't sure why, now that he saw that they were just bats. He started to heave a sigh of relief, realizing that the Romanians hadn't actually brought vampires as their mascots —

Hermione let out a chilling screech when, suddenly, a bat that had alit on the stone barrier before them transformed into a rather sinister-looking man who bore more than a passing resemblance to a young Tom Riddle. Harry knew it was stupid, but he had been expecting the first vampire he saw in person to resemble Snape, and was surprised to be confronted with what looked like a handsome, healthy (if rather pale) twenty-year-old man with a red glint in his dark eyes and a large, sharp, toothy smile as he surveyed Hermione's bare neck before him. Ginny gripped Harry's arm painfully, shaking violently. "He — he looks like —" she whispered, and Harry knew just who she meant.

Hermione had the presence of mind to pull out her wand, but Ron had already leaped between her and the vampire; as he was a dark creature, the vampire couldn't harm him. "Don't you come near her, if you know what's good for you!" Ron snarled at the young-looking vampire, holding his wand out.

To their surprise, the vampire smiled broadly, his sharp fangs overlapping his blood-red lips. "I thought I saw quite a bit of red hair in this area", he said, looking at Ron, Ginny, Percy, Bill and Fred. "You must be Weasleys!" he cried cheerfully, without a trace of a Romanian accent. In fact, Harry thought he sounded American. Ron's brow furrowed.

"What the —"

But the vampire had found the person he was looking for. "Charlie? Charlie Weasley! How are you?"

Charlie came forward now and, to the consternation of everyone nearby, hugged the vampire, grinning and laughing. The vampire kissed him twice on each cheek and Charlie did the same to him. Beside him, Harry saw that Ginny was open-mouthed with shock.

"Dimitry! How fantastic to see you! I didn't know you were working for the team now."

"Yeah, well, when someone's promising me a steady supply of food with no chance of angry villagers coming after me, I'm not going to say no, am I?" Dimitry said, laughing.

"Maybe you can visit after the match?"

Harry saw Fred's eyes widen, and Alicia, who was sitting between him and Sirius, seemed to pull both men a little closer to her, shrinking down in her seat.

"We'll see. We might be a bit busy celebrating, after our win and all —"

Charlie laughed. "I certainly hope so. I have a significant amount of money invested in Romania winning."

Dimitry turned and saw that the formation flying was continuing. "Well, got to go. Time to show off some more."

He turned and leaped over the edge of the parapet, and the crowd sent up a collective gasp before he transformed back into a bat in mid-air, swooping low over the pitch and then rejoining his fellows as they zoomed overhead and around the pitch one last time, finally transforming into their human shapes again, standing around the pitch, bowing to the appreciative

applause (although no one removed their garlic necklaces yet and stakes were still prominent).

Up in the stands, Harry and the others all stared at Charlie, who shrugged casually. "I met a lot of people in Romania. Lived there for years. What do you expect? You'd never know he was a day over two-hundred, would you? He lived in America for a long time. Only just came back home about ten years ago." Charlie shook his head. "Dimitry always was a ham. He'd have gone to California to try to be in films, but it was too sunny."

"And, er, wouldn't they have noticed his fangs?" Harry asked nervously.

"Oh, he can retract those. Dimitry's a good bloke. Likes dragons — but he hates dragon's blood. We had a good laugh about that. When I worked on the reservation, Mum and Dad sent me sweets, including Chocolate Frogs, and I had a Dumbledore card, you know, the one that says he discovered the twelve uses of dragons' blood. Dimitry likes to say, 'And not one of the twelve is *food*!' He calls it 'trying to drink rendered bacon fat'."

Harry shuddered at the thought and tried to put dragon's blood, vampires, his own blood and especially drinking rendered bacon fat far from his mind. He'd been feeling so distracted that he didn't even notice the match start; suddenly the fourteen players were zipping over the field, and Harry's pulse started racing as he remembered being out there with his own team, zigging and zagging in and out amongst the other players. His stomach leaped about excitedly as he watched their acrobatics, the Chasers tossing the Quaffle back and forth, and Beaters hitting the Bludgers at players on the opposite team, while the Keepers watched everything with a tense alertness and the Seekers hovered at the edges of the action, ever watchful for that glimpse of gold.

"Sirius! Move!" Harry cried, ducking suddenly. He also pushed down Hermione and Ginny, sitting on either side of him. However, the reason for this, a Bludger that had been hurtling directly toward him, was quickly handled by a Romanian Beater hitting the Bludger very hard at a French Chaser.

"Ooh!" Bagman cried. "Radescu tries and fails to wing Thierry Laroche. And now Devereux tries to send the same Bludger at Lemnaru, who dodges it handily", he added as a French Beater hit the Bludger with a

hard blow, sending it at Charlie's friend Natasha, who moved out of the way easily. Bagman made no mention of the Bludger having been zooming straight at Harry Potter.

Harry sat up, looking sheepishly at Hermione and Ginny, who frowned at him. Ron, however, was laughing.

"What's wrong, Harry, having flashbacks to our match? The Bludger that tried to take your head off?"

Harry grimaced at him. "Yeah. Something like that." He could have sworn that the heavy cannonball-like Bludger was heading right for him. But now both Bludgers were far away, being hit back and forth by the four Beaters at the far end of the pitch. He tried to take deep breaths; it felt like his heart was racing still, and he swallowed, trying to enjoy the game, but when he opened his mouth to cheer with everyone else (Romania had scored) nothing came out but a small croak.

The game continued, a fast and furious display of Quidditch prowess. Harry could see that even had the Welsh team won over France, they wouldn't have had a prayer against Romania. He admired Natasha Lemnaru's agility, dodging Bludgers and other players, and thought that Jean-Claude Jones might not be celebrating a win on this day. The score was eighty to twenty in favor of Romania when suddenly the Snitch was seen flitting about the middle of the field, near the ground. Harry's heart and mind raced as he watched it zip around the players, Lemnaru and Jones ducking and weaving, trying to reach it.

A Romanian Beater hit a Bludger toward Jones. Harry wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't been watching it through the Omnioculars, but the ball swerved in mid-air, making an impossible turn that sent it hurtling directly toward *him* again. He looked up, not using the Omnioculars; it was *still* heading toward him. Everyone else was looking to the left, where Lemnaru was inching toward the Snitch, slightly ahead of Jones. Harry waited for a Beater to hit it, but that didn't happen this time. Almost too late, Harry pulled Ginny and Hermione down again and screamed for Sirius to move. Luckily, he did; the Bludger went crashing into the stands, sending wood splinters flying and halting the game. It hit exactly where Harry's head and Sirius' shins would have been if they hadn't moved, going clean through the stands and continuing, moving away from the castle.

"*Bumpling!* Bagman cried, his amplified voice hurting Harry's head. "And a foul against Romania! Negrea has hit a Bludger into the stands —"

Except he hadn't, Harry thought wildly. He'd *seen*, very clearly, the ball change direction. It was hurtling at Jones and then abruptly *turned*.

"You ruddy ponces!" Charlie was screaming, having leapt to his feet and shaking his fist at the Romanians. "*Budos olah!*" he said, switching languages. Harry had no idea what he meant, but he assumed that if you were Romanian, you wouldn't let your grandmother hear you say that. "Don't you see the bloody Romanian flags?" he cried now, waving his own small example indignantly.

"And Adrienne Fourcade will take the foul for France!" Bagman declaimed. The French Chaser moved into position near the Romanian goal. The Snitch had disappeared.

"But he didn't do it!" Harry cried feebly, his voice catching in his throat. He picked himself up and helped Hermione and Ginny stand. "Negrea hit the Bludger toward Jones", he said to the girls and Ron, just as he heard a small *pop!* nearby. "It turned and headed for *me* after that. Didn't *anyone* else see?"

"I did", Katie said, breathlessly; she was the *'pop'* he'd heard. She had Apparated directly to the top of the stands. "I was on my way up, but I stopped and looked through one of the openings down below, and I saw it, so I didn't bother with climbing the rest of the stairs", she explained. "Fred", she said urgently, "do you have some Weasleys' Whacky Whompers with you? I have a feeling that Bludger will be back."

"Uca Lazar blocks the foul shot by Fourcade!" Play resumed, both teams zipping around the field again.

"I have some", Percy said quickly in answer to Katie, producing a drawstring bag from his robes and taking out some small sweets wrapped in paper with rainbow-patterned lettering. Despite the fact that Percy was running the family business, this seemed odd to Harry. He didn't normally think of Percy as the sort of person to carry sweets with him.

Percy began passing them round and Sirius, Neville, Fred, Bill and Katie immediately unwrapped them and started chewing vigorously. Harry looked at the thing Percy had put in his hand; according to the wrapper, it was gum. This being a Weasley Wizard Wheezes product, he was also hesitant to learn of its side-effects the hard way, as Dudley had with the Ton-Tongue Toffee.

"I'm really not that keen on gum, thanks", he said, trying to hand it back.

"Harry!" Percy said imperiously, reminding him strongly of when he'd been Head Boy during Harry's third year. "Chew and swallow it *now*! That goes for all of you!" he barked at Ron and the girls. "Can't be too careful!"

Ginny and Hermione hurriedly opened their wrappers and popped the gum into their mouths; Ron did too, less urgently, but Harry still resisted. "Swallowing gum isn't good for you. Dudley did once, and —"

"*Just do it!*" Sirius screamed at him now, alarming him. After an outburst like that from Sirius, Harry swiftly put the gum in his mouth and chewed as quickly as he could, swallowing with great difficulty. The gum tasted like sand, as far as he could tell, and settled in his stomach like a piece of lead. Then he saw something out of the corner of his eye, and when he looked, it was the Bludger, soaring back toward the castle.

Directly at *him*.

"Duck, Harry!" Hermione and Ginny both screamed, also seeing it.

"No!" Percy objected. "It should be all right now. You did swallow, Harry?" he asked urgently, referring to the leaden Weasleys' Whacky Whomper now sitting in his rather uncomfortable stomach. The Bludger was zeroing in on him. He nodded at Percy, sweat running down his face. "Let it hit you, Harry. Or else the spell on the Bludger won't be broken. If you swallowed, you should be all right."

Harry felt strange all over. He wasn't numb, exactly, but he didn't feel like he could sense the presence of his limbs and his very *skin* in quite the same way he was used to. He felt as though he were encased in some sort of protective sheath, like a knight's armor, only stronger, and invisible. He faced down the oncoming Bludger, bracing himself for the impact, hoping Percy was right. He knew he would be in big trouble if he was wrong.

"Oof!" Harry was unable to stop himself from grunting when the Bludger struck him. It had taken all of the bravery and willpower he could muster to remain immobile and let the Bludger come right for him, as Percy had instructed. Knowing that Percy was an Auror now helped; he wasn't sure he would have followed such an order previously. It struck him in the stomach and propelled him backward against the stone barrier. He hit the parapet hard enough that he heard some dislodged bits of stone and mortar fall down toward the pitch, bouncing against the wall on the way to the grass.

Ginny, Hermione and Alicia screamed when it made impact, and Ron leapt forward to grab his arm, to keep him from toppling over the parapet.

Harry panted and hugged the metal ball to him, which, oddly, felt like the fight had gone out of it. It no longer struggled against him and was strangely inert for a Bludger. He also didn't seem to have any broken ribs, or even a pain in his stomach. He looked quizzically at Percy, who was standing next to him now. *What kind of gum was that?* he wondered. Katie was on his other side, with Ron and Fred. Sirius was motioning to them to follow him, before Bagman and the other officials bearing down on them arrived.

Harry looked at Neville, Hermione and Ginny over his shoulder, shrugging. (They were following.) Percy was right, but *why*, and *how*?

Charlie stayed behind with Bill, Alicia, and Oliver and Alex Wood; Harry could hear Bill trying to keep Bagman, Cornelius Fudge and the French and Romanian Ministers of Magic away. Charlie was speaking to the Romanian Minister in his own language, very fast, without pausing between words, as far as Harry could tell. As he left, he could see out of the corner of his eye that Bagman and Fudge were fuming.

Katie and Percy hustled him down some stairs and into a bathroom labeled "Wizards"; Sirius had run ahead and now stood with the door open, waiting for them. As soon as they were inside, along with Ron, Fred, Neville and the girls, he used a charm to lock the door. Harry was still trying to get his breath. He was also still clutching the Bludger, which he handed to Ron now. Ron looked at it quizzically, tossing it back and forth from hand to hand and shrugging. Watching him do that, Harry wondered whether it wasn't a legal Bludger; surely it was too light to do him damage, and that's why he was all right?

Ron seemed to think that was a possibility too, for after shrugging over the mystery of the Bludger, he tossed it casually toward one of the sinks. It promptly crashed violently into the edge of the porcelain sink, making everyone in the room jump. A large chunk of the sink broke away and dropped noisily to the tiles, along with the Bludger itself, which landed with a loud ringing noise before rolling lifelessly into the drain in the middle of the floor. Clearly it was a regulation Bludger. Harry had forgotten that to Ron it would weigh relatively little. Neville stared at it with large, round eyes and Harry swallowed, surveying the damaged sink. He turned to Percy. *"What did you give me?"*

"What?" Percy said softly with a sly smile, his eyes glittering behind his spectacles. "You really thought we were just running a business

producing silly sweets?" He looked around, at his youngest brother and sister, at Hermione, Fred, Neville and Sirius. Harry also thought that he looked rather fondly at Katie, who looked back at Percy proudly. "Nothing I say leaves this room", he said with authority. "Sirius and Katie know already, as they've had occasion to use our products. Fred, of course, is one of our two masterminds, although we've also had some assistance from Snape and his uncle. Professor Sprout and Neville", he said, smiling at Neville unexpectedly, "know what we're up to because they've been making sure for some time now that we have a steady supply of mandrakes for one of our most useful sweets, one that every Auror keeps with him or her these days. Thanks for that, by the way. I can't believe you spent all last summer growing those ruddy things." Neville nodded in acknowledgment, turning a little pink.

Harry was mystified still, and he could see that Ron, Hermione and Ginny were, too. "Our products are *weapons*", Percy continued, "for Aurors and for Dumbledore's operatives. Even most Ministry officials aren't aware of it, for security reasons. The gum you swallowed, Harry, has Aegisthos Potion in it; if you read the instructions on the wrapper, you'll see that it's necessary to say the spell printed there for the gum to have any flavor to it. Saying the flavor spell transfigures an inert ingredient in the Aegisthos potion into something that converts the Aegisthos component into an inactive ingredient. Most people don't want sand-flavored gum, so they say the spell before putting it in their mouths. Plus, most people don't usually swallow gum. An Auror who's in a spot of trouble can just pop one of these in, chew and swallow, and they have a temporary protection from bodily harm. It doesn't protect against spells — only physical violence. And of course, the Aegis charm only blocks spells and doesn't protect against physical assaults, so this helps fill the gap. Some Death Eaters have been resorting more and more to purely physical violence that doesn't leave a magical signature. Carrying some select Weasley's Wizard Wheezes products is a lot easier than carting around vials of potion."

Harry looked back and forth at Percy and the others who were in on the secret of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. His mouth was open and working soundlessly. Harry saw that Hermione had colored at the mention of Aegisthos Potion, which had helped her to finally consummate her relationship with Ron. "I don't believe it!" he breathed. "So all of you at Hog's End are really —"

"— fighting the good fight, Harry", Fred said, grinning and clapping his hand on Percy's shoulder. Harry shook his head in disbelief.

Ron was grinning. "And disguising it as sweets!" he said, clearly quite impressed. "Bloody brilliant! The Death Eaters haven't caught on yet?"

Sirius shook his head. "So far we've been all right. I've managed to get out of more than one tight spot because of those `silly sweets'," he said, smiling.

"And I'm working on developing one myself that will give Fred and George the irresistible urge to clean up after themselves in the kitchen, instead of treating me like a house elf..." Percy said, looking at Fred and laughing. Fred, ever the mature one, stuck his tongue out at Percy, then grinned.

Suddenly, someone was pounding on the door of the bathroom. They were even more startled by this than by Ron tossing the Bludger at the sink. His voice still amplified, Ludo Bagman cried, "*Open this door at once!*"

"Ludo! End the sodding *Sonorus* spell!" Harry recognized Fudge's voice.

Sirius strode to the door, saying sharply, "Just a minute!" He turned to Percy and Fred, speaking in a low, urgent voice. "Get the girls, Neville and Ron into some stalls; standing on the seats, so their feet can't be seen. You should do that as well, Fred. You just produce amusing sweets, remember?" he said with a wink.

Fred grinned slyly and herded the others into stalls to hide, then claimed one himself. Percy picked up the Bludger with some effort and handed it to Ron (Harry assumed this was because it was so light for him), and Ron was now hiding in a stall with the Bludger. Sirius repaired the broken sink with a wave of his wand while Percy hustled Harry over to some urinals. "Pretend you're just zipping up, finishing", Percy said softly.

Harry nodded, one hand at his waist as though he was doing what Percy said; he didn't feel so invincible anymore; the potion from the gum seemed like it might have worn off. Percy positioned himself at a urinal two away from Harry; he was actually not pretending to fasten his trousers, but was unwrapping a purple-wrapped sweet, popping it into his mouth and chewing. Harry wondered what it was.

"This is Ludo Bagman!" came the angry voice, no longer amplified. "Open this door immediately before I blast it open!"

Sirius ran his hands under the faucet of the repaired sink quickly, then strode to the door, his hands still wet. He took the spell off the door and opened it, then started flapping his hands around to dry them. Ludo Bagman entered with Cornelius Fudge and the Romanian Minister of Magic. "Hullo, Minister", he said cheerfully, as though former notorious Azkaban escapees were accustomed to addressing the Minister of Magic every day. "I was in the middle of washing my hands." He held them up. "Sorry about that. I took the precaution of locking the door because Harry's with me. You know how it is when you're famous; people always gawping and wanting autographs. I thought — a bloke shouldn't be disturbed in *here*, of all places, yeah?"

Sirius went to dry his hands on a towel. Harry watched him and the others out of the corner of his eye, then turned away from the urinal, saying, "I should do the same, now." Ludo Bagman, however, positioned himself between Harry and the sinks, looking very suspicious.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Bagman said, sounding less concerned than incredulous. "That Bludger —"

"Yeah", Harry said quickly. "It really smashed through the stands. I reckon that Beater's aim was a bit off", he added, catching Sirius' eye.

Bagman frowned. "No, I mean when it came back and —"

"Now, now, Ludo. Harry's fine. It's wonderful that you're so concerned, and you too, Minister", a familiar voice said. Harry turned in amazement. Where he had expected to see and hear Percy Weasley, he instead saw and heard *his father*. The spitting image of Arthur Weasley stood before them all now, every hair on his head and line on his face exactly as it had been on Christmas day, when Harry had last seen him.

With a jolt, Harry realized that the sweet Percy had eaten was probably impregnated with Polyjuice Potion, specifically, potion with part of Arthur Weasley in it. Harry swallowed, seeing the way Fudge and Bagman responded to the presence of the ersatz Mr. Weasley; they were clearly far more willing to show respect to him than to Sirius Black.

"Arthur!" Fudge said now, sounding disconcerted. "I didn't know you were here. Thought you were working today."

"I was, I was. Finished early. I decided I could manage to catch some of the match if I hurried. How's it going so far?"

The Romanian Minister of Magic crossed his arms and looked very grumpy; he was about Hermione's height, with a large barrel chest and

dark brows which were lowered discontentedly over his black eyes. He only had about three hairs on his head, combed carefully over his otherwise bare pate. His black robes were trimmed with dun-colored fur at the neck and cuffs. His expression said that he was not accustomed to people disobeying him.

But instead of answering the question `Arthur' asked him, his face suddenly split in a rather gruesome but recognizably friendly smile, and he put out his hand to Harry. "Laszlo Constantinescu. I am indescribably pleased to meet you, Mr. Potter." He had a very robust voice, over-emphasizing his consonants, and Harry started to put his hand out, but he caught Sirius giving him the tiniest of head-shakes and quickly withdrew it, then held up both of his hands, his mouth drawn into a line.

"I would, Minister, but I still need to wash up." He looked pointedly at Bagman with one eyebrow raised. Constantinescu looked grumpy again.

"Well, don't just stand there, you idiot!" he barked at Bagman. "Let Mr. Potter wash his hands!"

Ludo Bagman sent Harry a look that made him shiver as he moved out of the way. While he was at the sink, the Romanian Minister stood next to him, practically gushing about Harry's performance in the match against England, decrying the unfairness that led to Wales losing to France, and how it would have been an enormous privilege for the Romanian team to play against him in the final.

"Unfairness!" the French Minister exclaimed in a honey-rich voice; unable to stay out of the bathroom any longer, she had pushed the door open and now strode over to Harry and Constantinescu. Harry was finishing drying his hands by now and the French Minister ignored her Romanian counterpart long enough to extend her hand to Harry, palm down, at chest height. "Mignonette Beauvais. I am charmed to meet you, Mr. Potter." He had been expecting an accent something like Madame Maxime's, but instead, the Minister's diction was quite perfect, if rather formal, with barely a trace of her origins revealed.

Harry took her hand uncertainly, and as she seemed to be rather moving it upward, bent slightly and gave the back a small peck, before straightening up and releasing it. "Madame", he said uncertainly. Her dark blonde hair was pulled into a loose bun at the back of her head and her sparkling hazel eyes made Harry feel that she was not only taking in everything around her at once but taking *possession* of it. The lines around

her eyes and mouth were minimal, and since she was a witch Harry was unable to tell whether she might be forty or seventy.

She turned to Ludo Bagman. "So, Ludo. I see you were not just trying to impress me when you said you knew Harry Potter."

Ludo Bagman turned deep red, and Harry wondered whether he'd been *flirting* with the French Minister. "Er, no, of course not." He suddenly threw his arm around Harry's shoulders and squeezed them painfully. "Harry and I go way back." He grinned at Harry, who felt a strong desire to kick Bagman in the shins. "That's why I'm so concerned. Getting a Bludger in the middle is hardly —"

Harry did his best to look shocked. "A what?" Is that what you think happened?"

`Arthur' Weasley stepped forward again, smiling and laughing. "I'm afraid you're mistaken, Ludo. Harry would be a wreck if that had happened. Does he look to you like someone who's taken a Bludger?"

Bagman looked vaguely discontented. "Show us your stomach", he demanded, not really responding to the question. Harry turned deep red, but when Sirius gave him a small nod, he unbuttoned his robes and lifted up his jumper and shirt a few inches, enough to see that he bore no marks, no damage of any kind. Bagman reached out with his finger and poked at Harry's ribs for a second; Harry flinched at his cold finger.

"Ticklish", he lied. He pulled his clothes down again and fastened his robes, feeling self-conscious about everyone standing about ogling his stomach.

"I tell you Negrea did *not* hit that Bludger at Harry Potter!" Constantinescu declared. "Our Seeker was about to catch the Snitch, and then —"

Madame Beauvais looked quite disdainful. "Oh, *please...*" she drawled.

Sirius cleared his throat. "Erm, since it is clear to everyone that Harry is all right, perhaps we should all leave? It looks like the rest of the match will have to be played with one Bludger only."

Ludo Bagman looked rather grumpy. "Yes, it does look that way. Odd, that. Even when they're hit out of bounds, Bludgers always come back. I wonder why this one *didn't*?" He looked very pointedly at Harry, who returned a blank stare.

When he was leaving the bathroom with the three Ministers, Sirius, `Arthur', and Bagman, Harry caught Bagman's arm and pulled him back a little.

"*How much did you put on today's match?*" Harry whispered conspiratorially, but not so softly that the others couldn't hear. Ludo Bagman glared and pulled his arm from Harry's. When the others turned, his glare turned into a grin, and he threw his arm around Harry's shoulders again.

"Well, well, good to see you again, Harry. I —"

"Did I hear correctly, Bagman?" Constantinescu said suddenly, very loud. "Are you permitted to *wager* on matches as the head of Magical Games and Sports?"

Bagman looked very nervous suddenly, and Harry could see small beads of sweat starting to form on his upper lip. "Of course not, Minister", he said very quickly. "I may sometimes speculate about who will win, of course, just in idle conversation. I predicted, for instance, that Harry here would win the Triwizard Tournament, and I was right about that, wasn't I, Harry?"

He squeezed Harry's shoulders painfully again, and Harry gave him a false smile. "Actually, you were a little off about that, remember? I didn't win outright; I drew with Cedric Diggory." Harry kept his stiff smile in place, looking at Bagman steadily, waiting for the older man to crack. *And I cost you a good bit of money, too*, he thought. It was very tempting to say it, but he controlled himself.

Bagman finally backed down, taking his arm from around Harry. "Oh, yes, right. Technically you both won, although you were the only *surviving* winner", he continued, emphasizing "surviving" in a way Harry didn't like. They were all standing outside the bathroom again, and Bagman and Fudge started hustling the Ministers away. "Back to the top box with us", Bagman said. "The game can't start again until I'm up there..." Harry watched them go, then looked quizzically at Sirius. His godfather nodded.

"Yeah, Harry. I don't trust him either."

Harry drew his lips into a line. Then beside him, hands clutched his arm and he beheld Percy Weasley once more, gasping as his body returned to normal and he no longer resembled his father. Harry watched the hair grow thicker on Percy's head, the features change subtly to a smoother, more youthful appearance. Harry was startled to realize, however, that few

other changes occurred. Percy was as tall as his father, his glasses appeared to have the same frames, and his clothing clearly didn't cause a problem for Percy when he transfigured, including his shoes. It was like watching Arthur Weasley age backward, becoming his younger self. For some reason, it had never occurred to Harry before that Mr. Weasley must have looked just like Percy when he was young.

Percy swallowed and finally stood upright without having to hold anything. "Sorry, Harry. Wasn't quite prepared for that. Thank goodness it didn't happen before they left."

Harry had a sudden thought, looking at Percy. "I know why you and your mum are still fighting. It has nothing to do with George and Angelina. It's because she doesn't want you to be an Auror."

Percy looked surprised for a moment, then nodded grimly. "She thinks it's too dangerous. But — after what happened to Penelope — I can't *not* do this..."

Harry looked at him sympathetically. After he'd learned that Ginny had died, in his other life, nothing was the same again.

"She'll come around eventually. But I am confused about something — I thought Polyjuice Potion lasted for an hour?"

"A normal dose does. That's just a small —" Percy stopped and stared at Harry. "How do you know about Polyjuice Po —"

But then the door to the bathroom opened and Fred peeked out, checking to see that the way was clear for the others to emerge. They all went back up to their seats, a few at a time, Sirius and Harry going last. Sirius repaired the hole where he'd been sitting and resumed watching the match as though nothing had happened. Beside him, Harry was startled to see that Ginny had tear tracks running down her face.

Without looking at her, he whispered out of the corner of his mouth, "You all right, Gin?"

She nodded miserably. "I just — I thought you were gone when that Bludger was coming for you", she whispered. She hiccuped and looked like she would start crying in earnest any second.

Harry turned to Charlie. "Charlie — can you get us to the Romanian offices where Ron and Ginny used the Floo network? Ginny needs to go back to Ascog. She doesn't feel well."

Charlie looked very grumpy. "Aw, Harry, why do we all have to go? The match just started again!"

"No — I'll take her. But she can't Apparate, so —"

Charlie sighed and took him to the office. He stood by, waiting, while Ginny and then Harry threw the powder into the fire and stepped into the green flames. Nothing mattered, the Quidditch match didn't matter, whether anyone saw them leave together didn't matter, only Ginny mattered...

When they arrived in the empty sitting room at the castle, a new snow was starting to fall, forming small drifts in the corners of the courtyard visible through the sitting room windows. Harry took Ginny to the couch near the window and drew her onto his lap just as the dam burst. She flung her arms around his neck, sobbing uncontrollably. He gathered her to him, warm and shaking. He'd never seen her quite like this, crying like the world had come to an end. That was how he'd cried on *her* after showing Ron and Hermione his Pensieve, but she'd never opened up and cried like this on him. She'd been very shaken up by her experience with Tom in the Chamber, but it still didn't come close.

After a little while she slowed down; her breathing began to sound more regular, and he put his hand on her tear-stained cheek and gazed at her shining eyes, which looked like liquid chocolate. "All right now?" he whispered.

She shook her head. "No. I — I'm sorry, Harry. I'm sorry for everything. For the ruddy plan Mariah and I cooked up, for ever thinking I shouldn't wait for you, for every moment I ever spent with Draco over the past two years — all of it. I — I had no idea how bad it would be, Mariah making a pass at you. When I held the amulet, I never expected to see the pair of you like that, rolling about with no clothes on..." Harry flushed. Ginny gave a small laugh. "Mariah said she wasn't expecting it either, that when she used her selkie charms for the first time, she hadn't known it would make *her* get rather carried away as well. She apologized profusely to me, she really did. Offered to let me hex her and everything. One of the hardest things about all of this, apart from having to pretend to be cross with you, has been treating her dreadfully too, at least in public, when she's been nothing but the dearest friend. She said that you were the one to put a stop to it, which shocked me, because selkie charms are very, very strong."

"But I *did* manage to stop us", he said. "And do you know what did it? One thought: 'She's not Ginny'."

She stared at him, her mouth open slightly, and he couldn't not dip his head and capture her lips with his, as he showed her that he'd really wanted to be kissing *her*, holding *her*, not Mariah, and not anyone else. She sank into the kiss with him, her breathing matching his, the heat from her mouth feeling like it was seeping into his entire body, down to his fingertips and toes. When he broke the kiss gently and looked at her, she seemed much more relaxed, and he kissed her nose lightly, while she smiled lovingly at him.

"When you found me crying in the common room after that, I wasn't really acting. I'd never been more miserable in my life, and it was all my own fault. I thoroughly deserved it. I thought it had been hard to see you in bed with Hermione, and then Katie. But that —" she choked, and he pulled her head onto his shoulder, rubbing her back. "I never should have given up on you", she whispered. "I should have —"

"Gone on pining for me forever? No, Ginny. How would I ever have woken up and figured out what a dolt I was? When we were in the pool this summer, I never had a chance to finish telling you about that time in Flourish and Blotts. You know, that day when your dad and Lucius Malfoy had the fight. When Draco said that it looked like you were my girlfriend, I wished I had had the nerve to say back to him, 'Yes, and don't you wish she was yours?' But — well —"

She smiled feebly through her tears. "But twelve-year-old boys don't do things like that. Especially when they have to listen to the girl's brother talking all the time about what an annoying ninny she is. Ron was your friend — you had to agree with him."

He put his other hand up to her face now, cradling it. "I wish I hadn't. Every time I let some remark Ron made about you pass without comment, I felt this awful leaden weight inside me. It was dishonest of me not to respond — but I wasn't just being dishonest with you, and with Ron. I was being dishonest with myself. The one reason I thought maybe I'd done the right thing not to really acknowledge you was that — well, it *did* seem to border a little on hero-worship. Putting your elbow in the butter dish, dropping things..."

She smiled at him and turned her head slightly to kiss his palm, making him shiver. "That wasn't because I worshipped you. All right, when I first saw you at the train station, your first year, I was utterly in awe of you. I admit that. But later, when we started getting letters from

Ron at Hogwarts — I *liked* you tremendously. And you know why? Because you were Ron's friend. Silly, I know, but I knew that if the famous Harry Potter had befriended one of the poorest boys at school, and if Ron thought you were worth his time, it was because you were a good person who didn't care about appearances. I heard about Draco offering you his hand. You didn't take a golden opportunity to be connected with one of the wealthiest families in the wizarding world. You became friends with my poor, threadbare brother with only a stupid rat for a pet and second-hand robes. And you did it in spite of the fact that he had an obnoxious little sister." She smiled at him and his heart turned over. "That made me like you, and I was very, very nervous whenever I was near you as a result. I *was* a ninny. But isn't that what happens? When you first had your crush on Cho, didn't you feel awkward when you were around her? Like your feet were suddenly very large, or like you always had bad breath or a piece of spinach in your teeth or something growing out of your ear?"

Harry laughed. "Oh, yes. I thought I was going to have a nervous breakdown from trying to ask her to the ball. And then it turned out Cedric had asked her first."

She poked him in the chest. "I think that if you had asked her out at the beginning of your fourth year, she would have accepted. She *did* like you. Cedric just got to her first."

He pulled her closer. "I'm glad I didn't. I know now that when she turned me down for the ball, that awful feeling must have been what *you* felt when you found out I didn't have a date, after you'd accepted Neville..."

She put her head on his shoulder, looking at his neck. "I cried for hours after that", she whispered. "I felt like you'd never notice me..."

He rubbed her back and turned to kiss her forehead lightly. "I was a little scared at the thought of going to the ball with you and just a bit relieved, frankly, that you were going with Neville. It seemed — it seemed to *matter* so much to you, and I was afraid I'd disappoint you. I was still rather fixated on Cho. I don't think you would have enjoyed yourself very much."

She smiled, her head still on his shoulder. "I might have had my feet trod on a little less. You danced very well with Parvati."

He laughed. "It was easy. I just let her lead."

They both laughed then, for a moment, but after that they just sat together on the couch in quiet communion while the snow fell outdoors, until Sirius' mother called them for tea. They joined the rest of Sirius' family, wondering how the match was going, but not really disappointed that they weren't there.

* * *

"Here, here! What's this, then?"

Ron's voice hurt Harry's head. Where was he? Opening his eyes, he found that he was on the couch in the sitting room again; he and Ginny had returned there after tea. Harry had picked up the *Daily Prophet* to try to work the crossword and Ginny, yawning, had lain down with her head on his leg. Soon her nose was whistling in that way that made him smile; he smoothed her hair out of her peaceful face and then went on working the crossword, feeling very content and domesticated. Sirius' mother sat on the other couch for a while, reading. She asked him whether he wanted to hear the match on the wireless; it was still going on, presumably, or the others would have returned. He declined, knowing he'd get a blow-by-blow from Ron, and instead they sat in companionable silence until Callisto Black decided she would go up to bed.

The children had already been put to bed by Ursula, after their tea, and she and Alan had retired after that as well. Walter Black had gone on a short trip to visit Sirius' cousin Ian, whose appearance Sirius had borrowed at the ceilidh. Casseiopeia and Floyd were still visiting his family, and the house seemed much less fraught with tension with them gone.

Harry didn't realize that he had dozed off; when Ron stumbled out of the fire, his exclamation woke Harry, who felt a bit disoriented. He blinked up at his best friend, trying to focus his eyes. To his surprise, Ron was looking at them now with a soft expression, his mouth twisting.

"Aw — do you two have to look so — I mean — oh, bloody hell — " he trailed off helplessly. Harry blinked some more; the world finally stopped looking fuzzy. He heard three *pops!* from the entrance hall, and then Sirius, Neville and Hermione were entering the room. Hermione stopped, and, after one glance at Harry and Ginny, had the same soft look on her face. She seemed like she was going to say something, but Harry put his finger to his lips, so they wouldn't disturb Ginny.

She smiled and bent over, whispering in his ear, "You look nice together." She straightened up, still smiling, and Harry felt himself color.

"However", she added, "Ginny should probably sleep upstairs, not down here on your lap."

Ron nodded vehemently. "*Definitely*," he agreed, crossing his arms.

Harry managed to gently wake her and Hermione led her up to their shared room. Ron and Harry walked behind them, Ron regaling him with Romania's victory over France. Harry wasn't listening very closely. He was frowning, remembering the Bludger again.

"Did Percy or Katie say anything about trying to work out why that Bludger was coming after me?" he asked Ron as they continued up the stairs.

"Yeah", he confirmed; "Percy said he'd get on it, try to find out who had access to the equipment before the match. Charlie's vampire friend said he'd try to find out something, too. We went to a pub in a nearby village after the match — that's why we're so late. Dimitry's a right nice bloke — for a vampire." Ron laughed. "And he said the same thing about me, using the words 'for a werewolf', instead."

Harry grinned at him. "I reckon we should have known what the Romanians would be doing for mascots, but it was still a bit of a surprise. Didn't they think it was a bit risky? Others seemed to think so, too, with all of the garlic and stakes they were handing out."

Ron shook his head. "Nah. Less risky than the ogres the French had, if you ask me. The garlic and stakes were for show, to get people stirred up. Vampires are smart. They know that food handed to them without a fight is better than food they have to sneak around for, with the risk that someone'll try to skewer them with a stake. Ogres are just stupid, and indiscriminately violent and bloodthirsty. They're like giants' dumb cousins."

Harry huffed at Ron. "Hagrid's not stupid."

"I didn't say he was! That's why I said they were like *stupid* giants. And even though Hagrid's not stupid, Harry, he *is*, well, he's just a bit *careless* sometimes, isn't he? And has, erm, *interesting* taste in pets. But he's not stupid."

Harry laughed. "You didn't think the Skrewts were 'interesting'." They began climbing the last flight. Ron was shaking his head and laughing.

"No. The Skrewts were a prime example of why extinction isn't always a *bad* thing. I would have gone down there and killed them while Hagrid

was asleep — if I could have worked out how, *and* if I didn't think Hermione would set the W.S.P.C.C. on me."

"The what?"

"Wizarding Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Creatures."

At that, Harry burst out laughing, and Ron joined him. But the hilarity didn't last long; fatigue overcame them as they stumbled into Harry's room, and they were soon fast asleep.

* * *

"Ow! What are you trying to do, Weasley, kill me with that broom of yours?"

"Don't tempt me, Malfoy. Do you have a better idea about how to get it here?"

"Well — you can't race if your bloody broom is broken!"

"Oh? And you can't Apparate to Arjeplog if *you're* broken!"

Draco and Ron glared at each other, toe to toe. Ron having the height, weight and werewolf advantage, Draco backed down, mumbling something incomprehensible.

"I heard that, Malfoy. You talk about your own mother", Ron growled, giving Harry a fairly good idea of what Draco had said.

Sirius cleared his throat. "When you two are *quite* through, we should make way for someone else to arrive. There's another Portkey in ten minutes."

Hermione drew Ron away from Draco, who fell into step beside Harry. He saw Sirius and Charlie grin at each other and shake their heads. It was the last day of the year, and the trip from Hogsmeade to Kopparberg via Portkey (a battered deerstalker) had been a bit bumpy. Ron's and Charlie's brooms had knocked them on their heads more than once.

"I wish we could have Apparated", Hermione said in a slight whine. "I studied up on it! We're fifteen degrees east and sixty north, about halfway between Oslo and Stockholm —"

"And zero degrees from the middle of nowhere", Draco Malfoy drawled, "just like I remember." They looking around after turning the deerstalker over to a Swedish Ministry official and emerged from the small cottage serving as the arrival point for Portkeys from Britain. Harry suppressed a little laugh, but let Draco see that he was smiling. Hermione frowned at them both. She was still not happy about Harry being friends with Draco Malfoy.

Harry also looked about; there was a single street with just a few houses. There didn't seem to be any restaurants or inns, or even a church or school. He'd never seen a place that looked more deserted.

"We couldn't have Apparated, Hermione", Sirius told her. "Anti-Apparition wards have been erected all around the town, so witches and wizards who haven't done as much preparation as you can't accidentally land in Muggle houses, or in the middle of a street."

"You mean *the* street", Draco Malfoy said, nodding at the strip that was barely visible in the darkness. They'd taken the five o'clock Portkey; the sun wouldn't be rising very soon, and in fact the race would be starting and ending in darkness, because of the very short days so close to the Arctic Circle. "You can't see my aunt and uncle's house from here, of course. It's across those fields. But how difficult would it have been to avoid so few houses? It would probably be harder to *intentionally* land in a house."

Harry saw that Sirius was smiling now, too. From what he'd seen so far, Sirius seemed to get along well with Draco. Harry took that as a good sign. Draco called him by his first name (he hadn't been his student), and each seemed to appreciate the other's wry sense of humor. Harry wished Sirius would budge on the issue of telling Draco about him and Ginny; he didn't yet feel that he had an adequate explanation for why he couldn't tell him.

A blue Swedish Ministry of Magic bus with a large yellow cross on the side suddenly appeared before the cottage, and the bus door opened. A large blond man who seemed to be both driver and conductor stepped down from the bus, saying, "Velcome! Velcome! Ve vill wait for the next three Portkeys, and then ve vill go to the race!" He grinned at them, and Harry ducked his head as he passed him, hoping his scar wouldn't be noticed. When they were seated in the rear of the bus (which had seats like any Muggle bus, rather than the Knight Bus's beds) Hermione pulled a book out of her bag and began to give unsolicited information about the race.

"*The annual broom race takes a total of about seven to nine hours, depending upon the speed of the slowest flyer*", she read aloud. "*After all racers have left Kopparberg, the wards are lifted and spectators receive numbers for Apparating. These appear on the back of the race tickets. Each witch or wizard must wait until his or her number is called, then proceed to the A.A.P.s — Approved Apparition Points.*" She frowned at

Sirius, sitting with Charlie behind her and Ron. "It sounds very regimented."

"Well", he explained to her, "they don't want everyone attending the race to try to Apparate to Arjeplog at once any more than they want everyone to Apparate here for the start of the race. That would be utter chaos. It's a good thing the end of the race is about three-hundred miles away. That gives everyone enough time to get there."

Hermione nodded. "True. And if you have a low number and go early, you may have enough time to explore Arjeplog and do some sightseeing. I hope I do." She turned the page. "It says here that there's a museum with a wonderful collection of Lappish silver —"

Ron made a choking noise next to her. "Erm, Hermione, can you *not* tell me that you're going to be staring at a pile of *silver* while I'm dodging dragons?"

She drew her lips into a line. "It's a *museum*, Ron, not a shop. I'm sure it's all behind glass or something like that. It's supposed to be quite beautiful. Anyway, I wouldn't dream of making *you* go. That's why I'll go when you're otherwise occupied."

Ron's mouth twisted. "Forgive me for being unable to see the beauty in silver these days."

Hermione smiled gently at him and kissed his cheek, where the scar showed from the Three Broomsticks attack. "There's nothing to forgive", she said quietly, looking up at him with wide brown eyes. Ron put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him. She rested her head on his chest and stopped quoting from books, and they waited in silence for the other race spectators to arrive and fill up their bus.

They soon discovered that the Swedish Ministry bus was on the order of the British Ministry cars that had taken them from the Burrow to London in past years, which couldn't bounce about the country like the Knight Bus, but *could* do extraordinary things when traffic was bad, like leap to the front of a line of waiting cars. This bus didn't need to do that, as there was no traffic, but it didn't technically keep to the road. Their route took them over numerous fields and through more than one wood. Several times, Harry saw rocks and trees leap out of its way, as the bus trundled on in what he was fairly certain was a straight line. He held onto the seat in front of him as they bounced along.

"Well", he said to Sirius, on the other side of the aisle; "the driver clearly believes what they say about the shortest distance between two points..." His teeth rattled in his head.

Sirius looked at him blankly. "What do you mean, Harry?" Harry shrugged and said nothing; wizards probably *didn't* think the shortest distance between two points was a straight line. There were many even *faster* ways of getting about using magic.

When they arrived at the starting point for the race, they went with Ron and Charlie to check in with the other racers, and Harry felt his pulse quicken; he'd never seen so many people with brooms before, surely. Then he, Hermione, Draco and Sirius had to move off to the spectator area, but they wished Ron and Charlie luck first. Harry and Sirius pounded them on the back while Draco stood nearby, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot. Hermione kissed Ron the cheek before starting to move away, but Ron would have none of it; he pulled her to him in a deep kiss, her face flaming when he finally released her. Harry saw that she had a small lopsided smile. Draco looked like he was trying to studiously ignore the pair of them and failing.

He assumed that Muggle-repelling charms were keeping non-magic people away, for otherwise, the spectacle would surely have drawn a great deal of attention. Fairy lights were shining onto the spectator area at either side of the starting line, and a huge number of racers were taking up positions behind the starting line. When they spotted Ron and Charlie they waved, and Ron and Charlie waved back. There had to be over two-hundred racers, and over a thousand spectators. Witches and wizards moved through the crowd wearing sandwich boards with odds on them; Harry looked at Sirius quizzically.

"There's a lot of wagering on this, Harry. You wouldn't believe how much money people lose on this race."

Harry nodded. "Yes, I would." That made him think of Bagman. "Do you think Ludo Bagman has a bet on the race?"

Sirius shrugged. "He might, although he really shouldn't. He registers the British participants. In a position like his, one has to be above reproach."

Harry guffawed. "Well, that's one thing Bagman definitely *isn't*."

Sirius drew his lips into a line, looking thoughtful but not responding. Harry was wearing his Omnioculars around his neck, and he lifted them to

his face now, peering at the racers.

"They're mounting their brooms. I think it's going to start."

The crowd grew restless and a low murmur started up from somewhere, the crescendo growing until finally the flag was lowered and Harry saw the amazing spectacle of over two-hundred brooms rising into the air at once. They didn't move forward, however, and Harry realized that they were just getting into position. He watched the cloud of broomriders hovering, waiting. He didn't realize he was holding his breath until the second flag was lowered and the flyers at the front of the pack zoomed into the cold, dark morning air, flying north to Arjeplog.

The crowd almost immediately started up a deafening cheer; Harry's ears were ringing with the noise, and then he realized that his throat was sore from joining in. He saw that even Draco and Hermione were caught up in the excitement, waving their hands in the air as the riders zoomed forward in a dark cloud. They watched and cheered and watched some more. It took over an hour for all of the riders to disappear from sight, especially as many people, like Harry, could see them from quite a distance using Omnioculars. But finally, a mountain obscured the last trailing racer, and the crowd started milling about, clearly wondering who was going to get the low numbers and have the opportunity to get out of Kopparberg first. Harry hoped they didn't have to wait all day; from what Hermione said, Arjeplog was a much more interesting place.

However, when they could no longer see the racers, Hermione grasped his arm tightly, her brow knit with worry. "They *will* be all right, won't they Harry?"

He put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed, trying to comfort her even though he had doubts himself. "They'll be fine, Hermione."

"But they're going to be invading the dragons' *home*, basically", she said, making Harry think she wanted him to tell her it *wouldn't* be all right.

"Yes", Draco drawled, "and the dragons will be worried that they're going to make off with their women. Dragons *are* very sexy, you know", he said waggling his eyebrows. "You can bet that all of the bachelor dragons have calendars hanging in their lairs with the best-looking she-dragons in provocative poses..."

Then Harry and Draco couldn't take it anymore and doubled up in laughter, while Hermione crossed her arms on her chest and frowned at them. Sirius was rolling his eyes, but Harry could also see a smile at the

corner of his mouth. As they made their way through the crowd to find out when they would be allowed to Apparate, Harry put his arm around Hermione again, saying, "There, there. It'll be all right, really. And now you're too busy thinking about how immature we are to be worried about Ron, yeah?"

She relented, smiling a little. "I suppose." She dropped her voice, looking furtively at Draco Malfoy, walking ahead of them by Sirius' side. "I want you to be careful, Harry. I think he's a bad influence on you." He nodded grimly, looking at the back of Draco's head, wishing Hermione would get along with him better, but knowing that their history of animosity probably made that impossible.

They didn't have to wait all day, but it was a full two hours after the last racers had disappeared from sight. They were all growing restless, tired of salesmen pushing through the crowd trying to sell them their wares, which didn't include enough offers of hot food and drink for Harry's taste, although he did get a bowl of hot meatballs in a brown gravy, with some flat noodles. He shoveled it into his mouth quickly, letting it warm him.

When he finally Apparated to Arjeplog, it was a relief, and for once he wasn't worried, for he knew he was prepared. Hermione had been quizzing him about it constantly. When he felt his body again, he was on the shore of a lake, with a small forest in the distance on the other side of the water, a white church steeple rising out of the trees. There were some other long, low houses visible but not much else.

They were hustled out of the Apparition area and onto buses which would taken them to the town of Arjeplog proper, since it was still about four to six hours until the end of the race. They found that the town was charming, and they wandered up and down the streets for a while, wondering what story the Swedish Ministry of Magic put out about why over a thousand visitors suddenly converged on Arjeplog on the New Year's Eve every year.

When the sun finally rose, they decided to eat lunch, finding a charming inn with a restaurant. Hermione pulled out her phrase book and spoke to the waiter for them. They had a nice meal and let Hermione drag them to the silver museum afterward; there was still at least an hour to go before the first racers would arrive. They returned to the finish line after leaving the museum, watching the sky to the south anxiously as the dark

became deeper; the brief daylight hours had passed very quickly, and the sky was covered in clouds, without any starlight at all seeping through. Harry felt like they were at the top of the world. When he said this to Hermione, she rolled her eyes and replied, "We *are*."

At length, a small speck was seen in the distance, then another and another. An excited noise started rumbling through the crowd. Harry watched with his heart in his throat; even with his Omnioculars to his face, he couldn't yet make out the identities of the first flyers to appear. He wondered how many would make it, not knowing whether to take *Quidditch Through the Ages* with a grain of salt. He hated to think the book was right about the race. In the second chapter, about ancient broom games, it said that at the annual broom race, the spectators Apparated to Arjeplog "to congratulate the survivors." Although Charlie and Ron were uniquely equipped to handle themselves while flying through a dragon reservation, Harry sincerely hoped that the book was exaggerating.

More and more flyers moved into view, becoming a black swarm against the deep blue sky. It looked to him like a large number of flyers had made it through, and he was almost ready to breathe easy again. Almost.

Next to him, Hermione was looking through her own Omnioculars and jumping up and down excitedly. "Oh, where are they? Do you see them, Harry?"

Harry squinted into the lenses; in the dim light, it was impossible to spot the bright Weasley hair. He thought a couple of tall, lanky riders might be Ron, but they turned out to be other people. Finally he spotted Ron, Charlie flying by his side. He let out a yell.

"There they are!" he cried. They were finally in the finish area, lit by fairy lights, as the starting area in Kopparberg had been. But rather than crossing the finish line, the initial swarm of flyers simply landed on the strip immediately preceding it, the witches and wizards who had flown the race all looking quite shaken.

"What are they *doing*?" Draco demanded to know. "Why aren't any of them trying to cross the finish line? What is this, some new kind of race that Granger's invented? Where no one actually *wins*, they just all *enjoy* themselves, and no one's disappointed at *losing*..." he drawled sarcastically, rolling his eyes at Hermione. She immediately bristled and opened her mouth to say something, her hand reaching for her wand. "Go

ahead, Granger", he said, before she could respond either verbally or with a spell. "I'd love to see you in trouble in a *foreign country*. Might I remind you that my aunt's here somewhere? She's the one who organizes this race, after all. There would be a nice news story. 'Hogwarts Head Girl Hermione Granger Arrested for Attacking Nephew of Swedish Ministry Official'. You'd have to wait until you're a hundred to be allowed in the country again."

"Shut up, the pair of you", Harry said harshly, although Hermione hadn't said a word. Her mouth was open, though, as if she were about to retort. She shut it abruptly now, looking at Harry sullenly. He didn't usually speak to her that way. But Harry was very worried, and had started to wonder how many had fallen to dragons. Yet another dark swarm came over the horizon, and another and another. They were probably at least an hour from seeing the last of the riders reach Arjeplog, but it was certainly looking as though a large number of them had come through without any problems. So why weren't any of them trying to cross the finish line?

A sense of foreboding gripped Harry as he pushed through the crowd. Sirius called his name; Harry turned his head and yelled, "Come on! I think something's wrong!"

Hermione, Draco and Sirius followed him through the crowd; Harry thought he heard Hermione giving Draco a piece of her mind as they approached. They soon reached the edge of where spectators were permitted. Ron and Charlie stood amid the other racers, holding their brooms, scanning the crowd. As soon as he spotted them, Ron began to work his way through the other riders, parting the crowd and allowing Charlie to travel in his wake.

When Charlie and Ron stood before them, they looked very serious indeed, and Harry couldn't begin to imagine what had happened. Ron let Hermione throw her arms around him with an inarticulate cry; Harry had seen her chewing her fingernails as the first flyers had appeared, before Draco had started trying to wind her up. Sirius frowned at Charlie.

"What is it, Charlie? What's wrong?" There was a worried tone in his voice, which shook. "Is it the dragons? Were a lot of riders lost?"

Charlie opened his mouth to speak, shut it instead, then tried once more. "That's just it. *There were no dragons.*"

Harry dropped his jaw. "What?"

Charlie nodded. "They're all just — gone."

Reservations

"What do you mean, *gone*?" Sirius said, incredulous.

"Gone", Charlie answered, his voice going up in pitch excitedly. "Not a single Swedish Short Snout anywhere. The reservation isn't that far away, either. After two-hundred miles, it's the last thing we were supposed to go through before the finish line. But — no dragons."

Hermione noticed Ron looking about anxiously. "What is it?" she wanted to know.

Ron frowned. "It's a bit hard to make out, with all the noise, but I thought I heard an official say they're going to ask some of us to go back to the reservation, take a look around. They're getting some doctors and nurses to go, too." Harry knew that Ron's sharp hearing was picking up on things the rest of them were missing. Ron nodded to Charlie.

"I'm game if you are", Ron said to his brother. "I'd like to bloody well know where those dragons are. Because if they *aren't* on the reservation —"

Charlie nodded; he looked very serious, his jaw clenched tightly. Harry felt a lump in his throat. Reservations were to protect dragons from poachers (the herd was periodically thinned, and one could only buy officially-approved dragon-related products resulting from the thinning) and protect humans from dragons.

"So, I'm volunteering", Ron said, his mind clearly made up. "You, Charlie?"

"Definitely. It seems unlikely, but I hope they didn't just wander off..."

"You're thinking about the dragons?" Hermione squealed excitedly. "What about *humans*? Those dragons could be anywhere, wreaking havoc on a village —"

"There, there, Hermione", Ron said, putting his arm around her and trying to calm her. "Charlie knows dragons *and* he knows dragon-poachers. Dangerous work, but possible. One summer, years ago, they lost over a fourth of the herd on his reservation to poachers who made off with them one at a time, in the middle of the night. It does happen."

"The other question is — where are the witches and wizards who work on the reservation?" Charlie said, as though realizing that he sounded more

worried about the dragons than he should. "There's a huge staff, and if even *one* of the dragons had suddenly gone missing, someone would have said *something*."

Harry didn't like the sound of that. He hadn't realized that the reservation would have humans living there, but when he thought about it, it made sense. Charlie had worked for years on a reservation in Romania, after all.

After kissing Hermione again, Ron went off after Charlie to volunteer. They all watched silently this time as the cloud of flyers rose as one and charged south toward the snowy mountains. Harry felt restless; he wished he'd already registered as an Animagus. He was itching to transfigure, spread his wings and fly south with Ron, Charlie and the others.

Sirius didn't know this when he sighed and looked at their grave faces. "Perhaps we should get a bite to eat. I have a feeling this may take a while." Harry didn't know how he would keep from jumping out of his skin while he waited. *I knew there was a reason to bring my own broom, even though I wasn't racing.*

They returned to the restaurant where they'd had lunch; while waiting for their food, Hermione went to find a bathroom, and Sirius spotted some people he recognized and went to talk to them, to find out whether they knew more about the missing dragons.

Harry stared around the room, trying not to meet Draco Malfoy's eyes across the table; they hadn't been alone since Boxing Day. Every time he saw Draco he felt dreadfully guilty about the times he'd been alone with Ginny, although she was no longer Draco's girlfriend and wasn't cheating on him. (Harry hadn't felt as guilty when she was Draco's girlfriend and he was kissing her at the top of the Astronomy Tower.)

"So", Draco started to say awkwardly, drumming his fork on the table noisily. "A bit odd, this?" Harry nodded mutely. There was only about a minute of awkward silence, but it seemed to be much more than that. Harry hadn't expected them to be immediate good friends again yet, but he also hadn't expected there to be these extended silences. At length, sounding desperate, Draco said, "Expectations. It's always disturbing when you have certain expectations and they're not met. Know what I mean? You fly over a dragon reservation and you expect there to be dragons. You walk into a room in a pub and expect to find Harry Potter in bed with a naked girl..." Harry stuck his tongue out at him, but felt himself starting

to smile in spite of himself. "...or you snoop around in a Muggle house and expect to find old Muggle photos, not wizarding ones..."

"What?" Harry said. "Are you speaking hypothetically now, or did this happen to you?"

Draco shrugged, starting to arrange the silverware in geometric patterns on the table. "Yeah, it happened to me. You never know when a family's going to have a Muggle-born witch or wizard. Probably loads of Muggle houses have some wizarding photos stuffed away somewhere. I found them in a shoe box inside a suitcase that was stuffed under a bed, with a lot of other dusty things. It wasn't exactly framed and on the mantel, was it?"

Harry raised his brows. "Some thorough snooping you were doing there."

"I was especially bored. We were in her parents' bedroom. They were out for the day and Felice had gone to change into some stupid nightie or something she said she bought for me to see. What was the point? She was going to be out of it in a minute anyway."

Harry grasped the edge of the table. "*Felice*? This was in New Stokington? I thought maybe it was at the Galbraiths', where we were working after fifth year. You know — Bobbie and Terry's place."

"You thought I was shagging Bobbie Galbraith?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Did I say I thought you were shagging Mrs. Galbraith? God. Sometimes you remind me of — *you*."

Draco laughed for a moment. "I think I know what you mean." He shrugged. "Bobbie wasn't bad looking, I'll give you that, but she needed to learn how to dress. And she was a bit old. And married. Say what you will about me, I don't think I'd go after a married woman. Probably. Anyway, if she hadn't been married and old, I reckon that her taste in clothes wouldn't matter if we were more concerned with her being *undressed*", he said, smirking and looking at the nearest waitress with a lascivious half-smile.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Focus", he said simply. Draco shook himself, tearing his eyes away from the waitress' bottom.

"Erm, yeah, it was in New Stokington, at Felice's place. So?"

"So? Did you bloody tell anyone? Was this after my birthday?"

"Yeah. Somewhere around mid-August. Anyway, who was I supposed to tell?"

"Oh, I don't know", Harry said sarcastically. "Sam. Or Aberforth, your boss. Or Katie, who was going to start Auror training. Perhaps Mrs. Figg, with whom you were *living*! *Someone* who would know whether it was a reason to panic. You saw all of them every day!"

"Sod that. Apart from the fact that technically I was cheating on Ginny *and* Mariah, I was *supposed* to be doing my job. I was supposed to confess to any of those people what I was doing? Was it my fault she wanted me so badly?" he said with a smirk.

"No, probably not." It was Draco's turn to stick out his tongue. "If you found wizarding photos, did it ever occur to you that Felice might *not* be a Muggle? That she might be a witch? And that she might have an ulterior motive for shagging you?"

"Er, no, it didn't", he said quietly, biting his lip.

"God, you're stupid!" Harry wasn't feeling much like being friendly at the moment. "She could have been a Death Eater for all you know. You're not exactly popular with them. How did she react to seeing your Dark Mark? She could have put a spell on you, or given you a time-release potion. All kinds of things. You didn't know *anything* about her, did you?"

"Erm, no", he admitted, reddening.

"*You* just saw an opportunity, and that's all you cared about! You really need to be more careful where you put your —"

"*Granger!*" Draco interrupted suddenly.

"*What?*" Harry squeaked. Then he realized that Hermione was standing at his elbow. Harry swore to himself. He wished he had been able to bring Sandy on the trip, but he wouldn't have been able to Apparate with her, so he'd left her in Ginny's care. He didn't know for certain that Sandy would have warned him about Hermione's approach, but she'd done similar things many times before. He felt like his heart was beating very fast.

"He needs to be more careful where he puts his *what*, Harry?" she asked guilelessly.

"Erm — his gloves. Can't be too careful. It's cold up here; can't afford to lose them." Draco rolled his eyes; while Hermione wasn't looking, he mouthed *Gloves?* at Harry.

Hermione frowned, not noticing Draco, as she was looking at Harry. "I don't have gloves. I always lose them. Now that I'm of age, I just put a warming spell on my pockets and put my hands in when they're cold. It's

lovely. Why are you bothering with gloves?" she said, turning back to Draco, his mouth was opening and closing like a fish's.

But then Harry was saved by the waitress arriving with their food, and Hermione went to fetch Sirius back to their table. They ate in silence, no one wanting to voice their worries about the missing dragons.

After the meal, Harry watched Draco go to the loo; when he was out of earshot, Harry leaned over the table and said to his godfather, "I need to talk to you."

Sirius saw that Harry's eyes were still following Draco. "About Draco, I presume?"

"Yes. He told me that when he was working at that estate in New Stokington this last summer, he found wizarding photos under a bed."

Sirius frowned. "I thought you did *gardening*. Why was he looking under beds?"

Harry glanced at Hermione, feeling his face grow a bit warm. "He was shagging the daughter. They were in the bedroom for that, but she'd gone to change into something, and he was bored and went snooping around."

Hermione drew her lips into a line. "Why that little..."

"Not now, Hermione", Sirius said abruptly. "The important thing right now is to know why there were wizarding photos in a Muggle house where wizard gardeners just happened to be working. What were they photos of?"

Harry shook his head. "Don't know. Listen, I'd stand a better chance of getting somewhere with questions about this if I could be honest about something else..."

"No", Sirius said quickly, knowing what Harry wanted to do.

"But Sirius —"

"No."

"But —"

"No." Sirius' jaw was set. "Please don't defy me on this Harry. Stop asking."

Harry sat back, crossing his arms, feeling a bit like a chastised five year old. "All right, then. If you're going to be that way, I think I have a right to demand a satisfactory explanation, which I have yet to hear. You say `no'. I say *why bloody not?*"

Sirius took a bite of his steak, chewed and swallowed. Harry clenched his fork tightly, his knuckles turning white while he reluctantly waited for an answer. While he was cutting another bite of meat Sirius said, "I've had

the opportunity to get to know Draco better since I came to Hogwarts to teach, Harry. And on this trip as well. And you know what? I like him." Hermione made a face; Sirius laughed for a moment and patted her hand. "No one said you have to, Hermione. But I can see why Sam Bell likes him, and Aberforth as well. Remember, Harry — they're his friends too, not just yours. He reminds me of me, when I was that age. And yes, I was a prat. But you like me now, don't you? And keep in mind that my feelings will be hurt if you take too long to answer..."

Harry smiled. "Yes, I like you. All right, so you like Draco, and so do Sam and Aberforth. And —?"

Sirius put his utensils down. "And I don't want him to know about you and Ginny."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Because —?"

"It's as much to protect him as to protect the pair of you. I mean, honestly — if Voldemort managed to get his hands on Draco and ordered him to say whether you have a girlfriend and to identify her, do you think Draco would just shrug and tell him? Or do you think —"

"— he'd refuse, and by refusing die —" Harry whispered.

Sirius put a piece of meat in his mouth and then said, "Right", around the food, before chewing and swallowing. "If he doesn't know, then he can't say one way or the other and he can't die by refusing to tell. Do you see? If you tell Draco, you're putting him in a very dangerous position. He doesn't want Ginny endangered. I think we all agree on that." Harry nodded; Hermione reluctantly did the same. "If he knew about the two of you, it would be rather like —"

"— like making him their Secret Keeper against his will", Hermione finished quietly, looking at Sirius with a very grave expression in her dark eyes. "That's why Harry's parents agreed to have the Secret Keeper changed to Peter Pettigrew, wasn't it? They were afraid you'd literally take the secret to your grave. That you'd die before giving them up. They were worried about *you*."

Sirius grimaced. "I went back and forth on it. First it was my idea to switch, then I changed my mind... In the end, Lily pleaded with me and I finally agreed. We all felt that I would be such an obvious target that making me the Secret Keeper would have the opposite effect of keeping them safe — or me. Peter, on the other hand, said he could go off and live in his rat form somewhere unobtrusive. No one would be able to find him

even if they *knew* he was the Secret Keeper. It *should* have been the perfect plan.

"Of course, as I already knew where the house at Godric's Hollow was, I needed to forget. A memory charm. It was a very strong one, and it's possible that if a Death Eater tried to negate it, I would have had permanent brain damage. But *they'd* still be safe. What I didn't know at the time was that Lily had used a very specific spell on me; if she, James or Peter died, my memories would be restored to me. That's how I knew something had happened. I was out on a date that night when suddenly these *memories* came roaring into my head. I remembered the first time I'd gone to Godric's Hollow, I remembered the last time, all of it. And the moment these things started dancing around in my mind, I knew there were a limited number of possible reasons for it. I knew I had to go to Wales, to find out what had happened.

"My date wasn't thrilled, but she let me go. I took my motorcycle, since I didn't want to leave it in Hertfordshire, where we were having dinner. I wish I'd Apparated, so I could have been there sooner. Of course, when I arrived at the house, I knew Peter had betrayed them..." He covered his face with his hand, then ran his fingers through his hair. "I wished then that I had been the Secret Keeper, and I felt like I'd killed your mum and dad with my bare hands. The problem with Draco knowing what you want him to know is that if he does the right thing, he'll probably die, and if he doesn't, then it could be you or Ginny, or both. What he doesn't know he can't tell, and he can't *refuse* to tell, either. That's all there is to it."

Harry slammed the table with his hand. "That sodding charm! That's why my mum wanted to kill Ron, so that I couldn't refuse a direct order from Voldemort to do it. If he was already dead, the order and my response to it would be null and void."

Sirius nodded, cutting another piece of meat. "Right. Now, are you going to eat or not?"

Harry began to pick at his potatoes in a desultory fashion. "I reckon. I hadn't thought about putting Draco in danger by telling him..."

"Well, now you're thinking about it. And while telling him might ease your conscience, Harry, it could cost lives. His, yours, Ginny's. Or all three of you could be at risk. Is it really worth it, just to feel a little less guilty?"

How guilty would you feel if someone died over your wanting to get this off your chest to Draco?"

Harry grimaced. "Did my mum give you lessons in how to induce guilt, years ago? Because you're very good."

Sirius smiled ruefully. "All mums teach that, Harry. It's required in their by-laws." He grinned, then took another bite, chewing it slowly and watching his godson. Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked sympathetic, but seemed to agree with Sirius.

Draco appeared at his elbow suddenly, making Harry miss Sandy again; he sat and started to attack his food, looking ravenous. Harry nodded almost imperceptibly at Sirius and Hermione and bent over his own meal, more worried than ever that he might say or do something stupid to give away his and Ginny's relationship — and now he had to worry about Draco dying if he did that.

* * *

When Charlie and Ron returned several hours later, with the others, they were waiting for them at the race's finish line. Ron immediately enfolded Hermione in his arms when he saw her, and then he unexpectedly gave Harry a crushing hug as well. When he stepped back from Harry, he could see that Ron had been crying, which surprised Harry. But Charlie looked like he was really the one who'd been put through the wringer.

"Dead", Charlie said briefly, his voice barely audible. "All of them — dead." Sirius put his hand on his shoulder. Hermione choked out a soft cry and put her arms around him and he held her, shaking, his face buried in her hair. Harry knew that Charlie had known some of the dragon handlers. He looked at Ron's face; his best friend had never had quite that particular haunted expression in his eyes before, even when he had almost killed Parvati and wanted to die himself. Harry glanced at Draco Malfoy; even he looked very concerned about Charlie and Ron's reactions.

"*The smell*", Ron said softly to Harry, looking like his gorge was rising. Harry knew it was probably bad for the others who'd gone back to investigate; for Ron it probably bordered on hell, with his wolf senses.

"Do you need to spew?" Harry asked him quietly. Ron put his hand to his mouth and shook his head; Harry wasn't sure he believed him.

"Already did that", Ron whispered from behind his hand, without shame.

They walked back to the village, to the inn where Sirius had booked rooms for them for the night. "All right, now Charlie and I will be in this one", he said, in the corridor outside their rooms. "Harry, you and Ron and Draco are next door and Hermione, you have the next one over. Let's all get some sleep; in the morning we're getting an early Portkey."

Sirius put his hand on Charlie's back and led him to their room; Harry wondered whether Charlie would really sleep. He wasn't surprised when Hermione followed them into their room instead of going to her own. Harry and Draco each sat on one of the beds and Ron sank into an armchair; Hermione crawled into his lap and put her head on his chest. He rested his cheek on her hair and abruptly began to talk, the words spilling out of him.

Harry wasn't sure how long Ron talked. It hadn't been easy for them to get into the buildings where the humans lived; there were hidden underground entrances, and tunnels connecting the various structures, to give the dragons the impression most of the time that they were living in an area with no human inhabitants. The family members of the dragon handlers rarely went above ground, where they risked being immediately burnt to a crisp. Even the handlers usually cast their spells from magical protective cover, seldom exposing themselves to any of the dragons directly. This was no longer a danger; the entire herd was gone. Fourteen cows and eight bulls, plus six calves. There were also three nests with five eggs, all of which were gone. The four dozen handlers who worked on the reservation, and their families, were all dead: men, women and children. Even pets were dead (cats, dogs and post owls). They weren't dead from the killing curse, either. They'd been slaughtered. It was messy. It still looked magical, as though blade spells had been used for the attacks. Cleaner than the most finely honed knives, the spells had ripped through the bodies like they were soft butter. Since everyone was usually inside, the racers, flying far overhead, had no inkling of what had occurred. They would have had to descend to the reservation and risk being attacked by the dragons in order to enter the human accommodations. Outsiders seldom visited; Portkeys were usually used for anyone who couldn't Apparate, so that the dragons couldn't see people coming and going.

In the main administrative office, they found it. The letter taking credit for the massacre. "Voldemort", Harry whispered. Ron no longer flinched at the name; Draco did.

"Voldemort", Ron said, echoing Harry, who fought the urge to smile. Ron would never go back to saying 'You-Know-Who'. "Or rather", he amended, "Death Eaters. The killings were recent, which is why no one knew anything was wrong. The staff were held prisoner for weeks, while the dragons were spirited away. Then, a couple of days before the race, they slaughtered the people. Death Eaters continued to maintain contact with the outside world, pretending to be staff when they spoke with the Swedish Ministry about everything being ready for the race. No one knew anything was wrong because everything seemed normal. Evidently, the head handler had told the Ministry to suspend all post to the reservation two days before the race, so the owls wouldn't agitate the dragons. It wasn't really the head handler, of course, but a Death Eater..."

Harry watched Ron as he spoke; he didn't think Ron was going to be sleeping any time soon. When he had talked himself out, Hermione kissed his cheek and whispered to him. She stood and laced his fingers through his. She looked at Harry for just a moment before they left. Harry nodded to her. Draco Malfoy looked grumpy as he watched them leave.

After the door had closed, he said, "Well, I'd have gone to have a look-see at the reservation if I'd known I'd get to shag Granger after..."

"Shut up", Harry said quickly, irritated that Draco was being so crass; he was also more than a little worried that Ron could hear him quite well. "You don't know what they're going to do. He needs her to be there for him right now. That might mean anything."

Draco smirked. "Like you needed her the night before your cousin's funeral."

Harry tried not to think back to that night, being in the bed with her, in the shower, the nightmares he'd been trying to beat back...

"Shut up, wanker", Harry said, trying to be harsher. "Even if they do — she's his girlfriend, and there's no moon. Safest time of month. Mind your own business and go to bed."

He laid in the dark, staring at the ceiling, trying not to see the images Ron had described, and feeling very tempted to spill his secret to Draco. When he behaved like this, it was very hard to want to keep Draco safe. *I can rub his nose in the fact that Ginny wants to be with me after all, and I can put him in danger.* It was hard to see bad in either thing.

When some time had passed and Harry still didn't hear snoring, he turned to see Draco in the other bed, also staring sleeplessly at the ceiling.

Harry suspected the tactlessness had been to avoid admitting that he was affected by what Ron had said. Harry looked back at his portion of ceiling. He had a long night of staring ahead of him. Best to get started.

* * *

It was very strange to be back at Hogwarts. Some of his normal activities took on new significance for Harry. Now that he and Hermione weren't going to Apparition lessons, they rescheduled Elven Army training sessions for those times. This was no problem for Ron, now Major Weasley, since he'd never been going to Apparition. (Harry promoted him from lieutenant at the start of their seventh year, so his rank was on a par with Hermione's; she thought she should have been promoted to colonel.)

More than two weeks into the new term, Harry stood at the front of the Great Hall, where they were training the elves, the tables pushed to the walls. The small figures stood at attention, stretched out before him, rank upon rank, large shining eyes in small, wrinkled faces all focused on him. He barked orders, had them spar with each other and with him, Ron and Hermione. But in a way, he wasn't really present. He was in the room on the reservation that Ron had described, where they'd found all of the children rounded up and slaughtered...

"They didn't even have the comfort of their parents, at the end..." Ron had said when describing what they'd found, silent tears running down his cheeks while Hermione covered her mouth in horror and buried her face in his neck.

The elves were ready to fight in the war, Harry thought, but how will we know where to send them? Who knew that there was a battle to be fought on the dragon reservation south of Arjeplog? To fight in a battle, you have to *know* about it. If only one side shows up, that's not a battle. It's a massacre.

When training was over, Harry dismissed the elves. Dobby, at the head of a column, saluted smartly. Harry smiled at him as he saluted back. "Dismissed, Lieutenant Dobby."

"Thank you, General Harry Potter, sir!"

"You can just call me General Potter, Dobby", Harry said, still smiling. "During training." Harry was going to tell him that he could just call him "Harry" the rest of the time, but Dobby was still in the habit of calling him by his full name. Harry decided against suggesting he use just his first name; Dobby might think he was criticizing.

Ron walked over to Harry, smirking. "I see. You promoted *me* so you could promote *Dobby* to lieutenant. Afraid I'd be insulted to have the same rank as an elf?" Harry looked at him with one eyebrow raised and Ron laughed. "Yeah, you'd be right."

He was rather amazed with Ron, who turned out to work quite well with the elves. He'd been somewhat awkward when he'd started the year before. When they'd been sparring earlier, five elves against Ron, Harry had seen him purposefully let his guard down, although he had the fastest reflexes, and allow the elves to overcome him. After Zenana had revived him, the five elves still sat on his chest and extremities, and Ron was laughing and saying, "Geroff", good-naturedly, ruffling the hair on a young elf, patting another on the back and saying, "Good job, that." Harry could tell the elves liked him, too. Hermione smiled benevolently on them all, and Harry could see that Ron would probably receive a reward from her later for his friendly interplay with the elves.

When they were using magic to move the tables back, Harry saw a piece of parchment fall out of Ron's robe pocket and he scooped it up; after glancing at it briefly, he put it in his pocket. Harry tried to hide his shock. He'd almost forgotten about the letter Ron wrote while he was at Ascog, thinking that it was a one-off, rather than part of a regular correspondence. Ron didn't notice that he'd picked up the parchment. Harry eyed him suspiciously; he'd just been behaving perfectly naturally with the elves, and hugging Hermione affectionately, and yet he was also walking around with *this* in his pocket. Harry was torn between being upset with Ron or mystified by him.

Having the rest of the afternoon free, they went up to the Gryffindor common room, where Hermione diligently sat down at a table with her N.E.W.T. text, setting a good example. Harry and Ron, however, decided to play Exploding Snap with Dean and Seamus. Hermione had to tell them repeatedly to quiet down as they were soon roaring with laughter, even while wincing and sucking on burnt fingers. Harry looked at Ron as they played; he seemed perfectly carefree. Harry didn't know what to make of it.

Before dinner, Ron said to Harry and Hermione, "You go on. There's something I want to put in the dorm, so I don't lose it. Forgot to do it earlier."

Harry swallowed when he saw that Ron was putting his hand in his robe pocket, and when it emerged empty, and Ron looked panicked, Harry stepped quickly toward him, whispering, "*I know where it is. Let's go upstairs and talk.*"

Ron looked angrily at him; Harry was taken aback by the open hostility. Hermione was oblivious, already turning toward the portrait hole. "All right. See you downstairs", she said, unconcerned. When they were in the dorm, Ron whirled on Harry.

"Hand it over", he said tersely. Harry did as he was asked. Ron whipped it out of Harry's hand, then turned to his trunk, opened it and rummaged in the bottom. When he seemed satisfied about its hiding place, he slammed the lid shut and turned to face Harry, who was watching Ron with his arms crossed.

"Care to tell me why you're getting a letter from *her*, Ron?"

Ron also crossed his arms and glared back at Harry. "No, I don't. Care to tell me when I gave you permission to read my mail?"

"Hermione's my best friend. If she's going to be crying on me because you've broken her heart, I think I deserve fair warning."

Ron's jaw dropped. "Break her heart?" Then he looked shrewdly at Harry. "So — you didn't actually read it?"

"No. I just know who sent it. And I know that you wrote to her when you were at Ascog, during the holiday."

Ron's mouth was open even wider now; he abruptly shut it and narrowed his eyes at Harry. "Been keeping that to yourself for a while, have you? This has nothing to do with Hermione. I'm not cheating on her and I have no intention of doing so."

"So why —"

Ron threw up his hands. "I had to have someone to talk to in hospital. The other patients on my ward were all barmy. I know, I was too. That's why I was there. But trust me — I was a paragon of stability compared to most of them. And everything I said to Dr. Bastion was picked apart into a million pieces for 'significance'. It was a relief to talk to someone who wasn't insane, brain-damaged or analyzing me."

Harry smirked. "But *her*? I mean — after what we saw in your Omnioculars —"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. But we saw that *after* I came back. I didn't know when I was in hospital. And when I saw her in Sweden —"

"Wait!" Harry said, shaking himself, feeling as though he'd just woken up. "You saw Nita in *Sweden*? Why didn't you say anything?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "For the last time, Harry, *I am not cheating on Hermione with Nita Anderssen*. God. She's — what? Ten years older than me?"

Harry shrugged. "That might not be an impediment to her. And you like blondes."

Ron grimaced. "I liked *a* blonde, and I think it's fair to say that was just because Fleur was part-veela. I'm actually rather partial to dark-haired girls. One in *particular*, as you know. And remember — Parvati has dark hair, too. Much as she tried, Annika never got so much as a snog from me. So there goes that brilliant theory, *General Potter*."

Harry drew his lips into a line. "You still haven't explained all this. How can you be friends with Nita Anderssen after Narcissa Malfoy wrote that article about you? And doesn't she hate Weasleys, anyway?"

Ron sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "You don't understand, Harry. First, she was a very good listener when I was in St. Mungo's, and she didn't seem to hold against me that I was a Weasley. In fact, she seemed concerned that the family might abandon me because I'm a werewolf. You don't know what I had to go through to convince her that they wouldn't, even though I had doubts myself at first. Perhaps having to defend my family did me good; I had to believe what I was saying before I could convince *her*. And for your information, I spent a lot of time singing Hermione's praises to her. Traditionally, that isn't a good way to woo an older mistress, is it?"

Harry grunted a reluctant agreement to this. "But you didn't say anything about running into her in *Sweden*."

Ron looked down at his hands and sat heavily on his trunk. "We didn't really meet up under the best of circumstances. Since her mum is the organizer of the race, she wanted Nita to go as one of the investigating doctors, when we went back to the reservation. Nita didn't want to, at first, as she'd been going out of her head trying to convince her mum not to resign her post in disgrace. She was worried that if she went, when she returned she'd find her mum had given up her job. Finally, when her mum promised not to make any rash decisions until after Nita returned, she agreed to go. We were with a racer from Italy when we found the children." Harry could see that Ron's eyes were wet. "She said that she'd

never cried before while doing anything that was connected with medicine. That was the first time..." he choked. "She's really not too bad. She's definitely opinionated. We talked a bit about Malfoy's dad..." He looked very grim then and pressed his mouth closed.

"What?" Harry said, wondering what they'd discussed.

"Never mind. Anyway, she told me in Sweden that she was on the outs with her aunt. I confronted her, told her I knew her beloved Aunt Cissy was Daisy Furuncle. I didn't tell her how I knew. She was surprised. She said that she was really hacked off at Malfoy's mum *because* she'd written that article about me. They weren't talking."

Harry peered at Ron; there was something he wasn't saying. "So you're corresponding with Nita Anderssen now, Draco Malfoy's cousin, but there's nothing going on?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Come on, Harry. Hermione's *your* friend, but do I assume that every time I'm out of the room the pair of you are shagging? I *do* think that a man and a woman can be friends without it having to involve sex. I thought you did, too." He raised one eyebrow. "Or should I worry about you and Hermione —?"

Harry swallowed, looking away from Ron. He remembered the night on the hearth rug, while Ron was in St. Mungo's. "Of course not", he said quickly. "Besides, I love Ginny."

Ron nodded. "All right then. Let's drop this."

They started toward the door. Harry said, "But why haven't you told Hermione?"

Ron looked levelly at him. "What makes you think I haven't?"

His best friend turned and moved swiftly down the stairs. Harry followed him, thinking about what Ron had said and wondering still about his friendship with Nita Anderssen.

* * *

Harry watched Ron and Hermione as they ate breakfast. Ron passed Hermione a plate of bacon and she took one rasher only, while she passed a bowl of berries to him, so he could spoon them into his porridge. They seemed to have reached a level of silent symbiosis where they didn't always need to speak. It wasn't a hostile silence but one punctuated by sly looks and affectionate smiles. And just because he was her boyfriend, Hermione didn't let up on nagging Ron about his schoolwork. Ron said

that he reckoned he'd know she'd been replaced by someone taking Polyjuice Potion if she ever did stop.

Harry glanced at Ginny as she ate, missing her so dreadfully, but they hadn't dared spend any time together since returning to school. There were just too many people around. Sometimes when they were at Dueling Club meetings, while they were waiting for others to duel, they would share a look across the room, or they might do the same in the Gryffindor common room if no one else was about apart from Ron, Hermione and Neville. He sighed and took a bite of his toast, chewing glumly.

The post owls soared in through the clerestory windows; it was a welcome distraction. Hedwig brought Harry a note from Hagrid, asking him, Ron and Hermione to tea. Harry was glad; he missed Hagrid, whom he'd only been able to see during Care of Magical Creatures classes when he'd been training as a professional Quidditch player, and when he had Apparition classes in addition to Elven Army training, Dueling Club and prefects' meetings. Now that he wasn't training on the Welsh team (although practices would start again in the spring) and he had his Apparition license, he'd have more free time.

Hermione had received some more newspapers from her parents; she frowned over the *Times*. "Alicia's dad's trial begins next month", she said. "The barrister Sirius hired for him asked for plenty of time to prepare, but it still doesn't look good. He can't produce any witnesses to bolster his alibi, and all of the forensic evidence is against him, plus, they have him committing the crimes on film. Security cameras."

Harry and Ron digested the depressing news. Other students were reading their letters, opening packages from parents and otherwise chattering happily. For most of them, the war hadn't really intruded on their lives yet. But then Harry noticed that Gabrielle Delacour had received a post-owl; she sat near Will Flitwick and Jamaica Thomas. Harry thought Jamaica was asking her politely about her letter. Gabrielle gave her a sad smile.

"Eet is from my seestair's midwife. I am an aunt. My seestair has had her baybay."

Hermione heard this and leaned forward. "Congratulations, Gabrielle. Boy or girl?"

Gabrielle looked down at the letter. "Eet eez a boy. Ze midwife says zat eef I have a difficulty wiz pairmission to see my seestair and nephew, she

weel talk to Professor Dumbledore for me."

Harry looked at the head table; Dumbledore's seat was empty. "Professor Dumbledore isn't here right now, but I'm sure Professor McGonagall will let you go. And she's your head of house. Professor Dumbledore would probably just defer to her anyway."

Gabrielle smiled at him; he was glad to see that she didn't seem to be upset with him anymore. "Would you go wiz me?"

Hermione smiled warmly at her. "We both will. With the Head Boy *and* Head Girl, how can you lose?"

The three of them crossed the hall to the head table and approached Professor McGonagall, in her customary place, next to Dumbledore's empty seat. After explaining the situation to her, she nodded and said, "The previous visit to your sister was without incident. I believe that Remus Lupin is not available to accompany you at the moment, however." She turned to Sirius, beside her. "Professor Black, do you have room in your schedule to accompany Miss Delacour and our Head Boy and Girl to St. Mungo's?"

Harry started to object, not feeling the need to see Fleur again. She'd been very queer toward him. Hermione trod on his foot, making him bite his tongue before treating Professor McGonagall to an impromptu tour of his vocabulary of swear words.

"Yes, Professor", Sirius answered with a nod. "I think I can manage that."

"Thank you, Professor", McGonagall said. Harry was trying not to laugh now; he wondered now whether, in the staff room, the teachers were constantly saying, "*But Professor, I find that I must disagree...*" and "*Disagree? How can you say that, Professor?*" followed by, "*Because, Professor, I recently read a journal article...*"

"Harry, wake up", Hermione hissed, putting her elbow in his ribs. He winced. She was being very annoying today.

"I'm here. Don't put *me* in hospital, please", he answered, rubbing his side as they walked back to the Gryffindor table with Gabrielle.

"In case you weren't paying attention, as we have no first lesson today, and Gabrielle's first lesson is with Professor McGonagall, she's being permitted to go right after breakfast, so we'll go down to Hogsmeade after eating and Floo to St. Mungo's."

Harry vaguely remembered now hearing Professor McGonagall saying something about Gabrielle being an excellent Transfiguration student, but he hadn't really heard much else while his mind had been wandering. "Of course I heard all that", he lied. "I wasn't originally expecting to be going out so early, though. We should go get our cloaks." However, when he, Hermione and Gabrielle returned to the entrance hall to meet Sirius, they found him waiting with Alicia, who was also wearing a heavy winter cloak.

"Alicia's coming", Sirius said brightly, making Harry and Hermione exchange a worried look. They didn't say a word, though. Harry watched Gabrielle as the five of them walked to Hogsmeade, a light dusting of snow on the road crunching under their boots. Did she know who Alicia was? he wondered. Did she know who the father of her nephew was?

Harry was used to the security procedures at St. Mungo's by now; he hardly noticed anymore. When they were walking down the high stone corridors, passing the doctors and nurses going about their business, that worried him for a moment, but then he noticed that they weren't going toward the ward where Ron and Fleur had been. They'd climbed some broad marble steps and were proceeding down an unfamiliar corridor. He soon learned why: Fleur was now with the other new mothers and their babies.

Sirius stopped a nurse in the corridor, to check that they were going in the right direction; they had to turn around and retrace their steps slightly. Finally finding the place, they heard the distinct sharp noise of a baby crying as a nurse showed them to Fleur's room. It was as bare and austere as Ron's hospital room had been. When they entered, a young nurse was carrying a small bundle in her arms, rocking it and cooing to it while the wails continued. She frowned when she saw five people preparing to enter.

"`Oo are you, then? `Ere I am, tryin' to convince this foreign piece o' baggage to feed `er own child, and now I got a bleedin' audience..."

Harry saw Hermione put her hands on Gabrielle's shoulders when the young girl bristled at this comment; Harry wondered whether the nurse knew what a very bad idea it was to anger someone who was part-veela. Hermione's fingers looked like they were gripping Gabrielle very tightly, and he saw her give Fleur's little sister a tight-lipped shake of the head.

Harry looked at Fleur; she was much thinner than when he'd seen her last, with good reason, but just as odd and detached from the world. She

sat in a chair near the window, staring unblinkingly at the blank, white winter sky. They all winced as the baby let loose a cry that took the noise up a notch; Fleur seemed not to notice at all.

Alicia stepped forward. "I'm married to the baby's father, if you must know. Here, let me try to do something with him..."

The nurse looked at Alicia uncertainly for a moment, then handed the baby to her. Alicia carried the crying, red-faced baby to the bed and sat on the edge. She held out her hand to the nurse and said, "Hand me your wand. They took ours." The nurse hesitated, as there was a good reason why visitors' wands were confiscated. However, she seemed at a loss for how to quell the baby's cries herself, so she took out her wand and handed it to Alicia, who passed it over her own chest, murmuring, "*Lactatio*." She nodded at the nurse and handed the wand back; then Harry was jolted as Alicia very calmly opened her robes and blouse and began to unfasten her bra. He turned away, red faced, then turned back again when the baby's cries stopped, curious. The baby had latched onto Alicia and was nursing contentedly now, one of his little hands brushing over the curve of her slight breast. Harry swallowed and turned away again. He noticed, however, that Sirius did not seem avert his eyes at any time, and he wondered at this.

After some rustling, Hermione told him, "You can turn around now, Harry." He did, finding that a soft blanket was hiding both the nursing baby and Alicia's chest. He still felt a bit red-faced.

"Thanks for that, miss", the nurse said. "Ma'am, I should say. *She* won't do it. Just stares an' stares. She don't touch `im, hold `im, nuffin'. We've given `im some bottles, but `e should `ave his mum's milk. Best thing." She glanced at Fleur, shaking her head. "A shame. So pretty. But nuffin' there."

"What's his name?" Hermione wanted to know. The nurse snorted.

"That we know. Arne FitzDavies Delacour."

"Arne?" Harry said, frowning.

"It means *eagle*", Alicia said, swallowing, still holding the baby tightly. "Roger wanted that name. Because of being in Ravenclaw. He contacted Fleur's midwife months ago, to tell her that, so there'd be no question when the baby was born."

Harry nodded. "Shouldn't his name be Arne Delacour Davies? What's this FitzDavies?"

Hermione, to his surprise, colored. "It means *illegitimate son of Davies*," she said quietly. "Like *FitzRoy* means *illegitimate son of the king*."

Harry looked at Alicia, who was glancing under the blanket. "Oh", he said softly.

"I'll take him", Alicia said suddenly, looking up at the nurse. Gabrielle gasped, then gripped Hermione's arm.

"Er —" the nurse responded awkwardly. Harry was surprised; he didn't think she was the sort to be at a loss for words.

Sirius stepped forward and put his hand on Alicia's shoulder, his face full of concern. "Are you sure about this?" he said softly.

She looked up at him and nodded, then looked at the nurse. "My husband is — away for the moment. But he *is* the father, and I am his legal wife. *She's* clearly not competent. I can feed him by magically inducing lactation, I can change his nappies, I can do whatever he needs a mother to do. What do I have to sign to have permission to take him? He can't just stay here. His mother is catatonic, and she needs to go back to a ward where she'll be treated for her condition."

The nurse looked back and forth between Fleur and Alicia and Gabrielle, clearly adrift in this situation. Gabrielle ran to her sister, taking Fleur's face in her hands and murmuring to her in French. Harry strode to Fleur and crouched before her; Gabrielle moved to her side. "Fleur!" he said sharply, trying to get her attention. "Fleur, it's Harry. I've come again. *Har-ree*. You've a beautiful son. Don't you want to see him?" Gabrielle started speaking to her sister very rapidly, presumably translating what Harry had said.

Hermione walked to Harry and put her hand on his shoulder. "Harry —"

But Harry gazed up at Fleur's perfectly placid, expressionless face from his position on the floor, trying to will her to notice that she was a mother, that her sister was speaking to her, anything. Out of the corner of his eye, he sensed that Alicia had removed the blanket from her front and took the baby from her breast. Harry tried to keep his eyes on Fleur, but at last, curiosity forced him to look at Alicia. She was buttoning her blouse again, then fastening her robes, while Sirius held the baby. He handed the boy back to her and she approached Harry, placing the baby carefully in

his arms. He was surprised both by how small and light Roger and Fleur's baby was, and how substantial, how warm and solid and squirmy.

"Fleur", he whispered now, holding up the baby for her to see. He was no longer red and screaming but rather content-looking, some milk dripping from the corner of his mouth. "See him? See your son?" Gabrielle's translation poured out again.

She looked past them out of doors still. Nothing about her expression — or rather, the lack thereof — changed. Harry sighed and stood with the baby. He looked down at him, at his dusting of dark hair, his large blue eyes, his round cheeks and very pale skin. He was the image of Roger Davies.

The image of a Death Eater.

Harry shook himself, trying not to think that. He'd been trying to protect his family. Harry had offered to do as much, in the Forbidden Forest, to protect Ron and Hermione. *They* were like *his* family. He held the baby tighter, thinking of what his mother had gone through in his other life to protect *her* family. He looked at Alicia again. She had nothing now, he thought. Nothing but this baby. Roger was probably dead, Harry realized. If he was just in hiding — how could someone do that? How could Roger not emerge from hiding to come see his son, take responsibility for him?

"Who do we talk to?" Harry asked the nurse softly, handing the small boy to her. Gabrielle looked up at him and took his hand in hers; her look seemed to say that he had tried, they had both tried, but it was no use. The nurse drew her lips into a line.

"The midwife. I need to take `im back to the nursery. Follow me; I'll take you to her office."

And so it was settled. As the legal wife of the father of record (Roger's name was on the birth certificate) Alicia was permitted to take Arne FitzDavies Delacour back to Hogwarts, to act as his mother until further notice. Oddly enough, Gabrielle seemed to be quite happy with this arrangement.

"Can I come to see `eem?" she asked breathlessly, holding her nephew and watching him grasp one of her fingers with his tiny hand.

"Of course you may", Alicia said generously to the young girl. "You're in Gryffindor, right? I was in Gryffindor, too", she said, sounding a little

wistful, as though she wished she were back in school, when her life wasn't quite so complicated.

The doctor went with them to the entrance hall of St. Mungo's, helping Alicia to prepare to take the baby through the Floo network. They made the trip back to Hogsmeade without incident, then walked to the castle from the village, each of them helping to carry some baby paraphernalia, except for Alicia, who carried little Arne close to her chest in a sling the midwife had given her.

Harry was shocked that the trip hadn't taken very much time at all; he and Hermione were only ten minutes late to History of Magic. While the ghostly Professor Binns droned on, Harry and Hermione filled Ron in on what had happened at St. Mungo's. Ron's jaw dropped. "So — so you saw her — *feeding* the baby?"

Hermione hit his arm with the back of her hand. Ron didn't seem to notice. Harry felt himself going red, but he said, "It's a perfectly natural thing, Ron. It's how we all start off in life. Nothing to get excited about", he lied, as he'd been rather uncomfortable and yet curious about what Alicia was doing (and guilty after taking peeks).

"So — she's going to be living here at Hogwarts and taking care of her husband's kid while her dad goes on trial for murder. Weird. That's all I have to say. Very, very weird."

Harry and Hermione nodded; they all agreed on that.

After lunch they had Herbology; when the lesson was over and Professor Sprout asked for volunteers to help repot some mandrakes, Harry smirked at Neville and stepped up to help. Neville gave him a sly look as they went to get some pots.

"I can't believe you never said anything about the mandrakes, Nev", he whispered to him. "Even to Ron. He didn't know what his own brothers were up to!"

Neville shrugged as he worked. "As you've learned by now, Harry, I can keep secrets rather well."

Harry put his earmuffs on, thinking about how true this was; Neville hadn't told any of them about his parents for years. And Harry certainly hadn't suspected that he was a willing participant in the Great Plan. When they were walking down to Hagrid's afterward for their final class of the day, Neville was beside Harry while Hermione and Ron walked ahead.

"Um, Harry, can I ask you something?" Neville said uncertainly. "Do you remember Ron saying something about getting me my own girlfriend —?"

Harry laughed and slung his arm around Neville's shoulders. "That's right. We've been quite negligent about that. Who've you got your eye on?"

Neville looked around furtively, then whispered a name. Harry stopped, taking his arm from Neville's shoulders and swallowing. "Erm, you realize that might be a bit difficult..."

Neville shoved his hands into the pockets of his cloak. "Yeah, I reckon so. You think — maybe if I send her a really nice Valentine? That's only about a month away."

As they continued walking, Harry shrugged. "That might help break the ice. Has she ever shown *any* interest in you?"

Neville frowned. "Not really." He sighed as they reached Hagrid's hut. The Slytherins and the other Gryffindors who were already there all looked rather apprehensive. They stood on the frosty ground, shivering in the wind, while Hagrid wheeled a large crate out of his hut and into the fenced paddock nearby, which sometimes held baby unicorns or hippogriffs (after Harry's fifth year, Hagrid decided to include these in the curriculum again, but only for fifth year and up). After parking the crate, which looked large enough to hold Hagrid himself and a little room to spare, he came to the fence to speak.

"Afternoon, all!" he said brightly, looking very cheerful and excited. He clapped his huge hands together and grinned at them, even the Slytherins. Draco Malfoy sneered; if Hagrid was happy at the beginning of the lesson, that was a very bad sign, his expression seemed to say. Harry wasn't so certain he didn't think the same. "Now, I ain't doin' this fer jest anyone. On'y seventh years. You lot'll need practice on these sort o' creatures ter pass yer N.E.W.T.s. I spoke ter Perfessor Figg, and ever'one who does well with this gets ter skip one o' her assignments. Now, Duelin' Club members up front, as they'll have the most experience in how ter subdue `im *without* hurtin' `im, but I wan' ter give ever'one a chance. All right, now, we'll start with —" He consulted a parchment in his hand; "Millicent Bulstrode, Draco Malfoy, Harry Potter and Ron Weasley", he read, as though he'd never met them and he hadn't invited Harry and Ron to tea after class.

Harry swallowed, drawing his wand. He leapt lightly over the fence, as did Ron. Draco Malfoy started to, until he realized that Millicent needed

some help, which he reluctantly gave her. The four stood arrayed before the crate, which was eerily still and silent.

"Now, don' think `e'll mind the cold. Remember — 'e's in `is element in the cold. Right now `e's stunned. When `e's revived, `e'll be a wee bit cross. Try not to antagonize `im, yeah? And remember ter have fun!" Hagrid added, grinning.

The four of them looked at each other apprehensively. *Cross?* Harry thought. They'd be very lucky if he was merely *cross*. And they were supposed to have *fun*?

"I'll do it", Harry said finally, when neither Ron, Draco nor Millicent said anything. "I'll cast the spell to revive him." They all nodded grimly and stepped back a little, to give him a clear field. He pointed his wand at the crate, shaggy pure white fur showing through the large cracks between the wooden planks.

"*Ennervate!*" he cried. A crackling white light shot from his wand and slid cleanly through the boards, striking the creature waiting within. After a moment's hesitation, there was a roar of outrage, and the crate exploded, splintery wood flying in all directions as the creature erupted in rage, ripping his prison to shreds.

"Harry!" Hagrid cried, chiding him. "Ye should `ave cast the spell ter *open the crate* first! Now it's ruined!"

Harry called over his shoulder to Hagrid, "I'll repair the crate later, Hagrid! I've got bigger worries right now!" The yeti slogged toward them, his arms outstretched and his eyes wild.

* * *

Afterward, they were laughing about it of course. The yeti was stunned again and back in his repaired crate, which they left standing in the paddock instead of wheeling it back into Hagrid's hut. (Hagrid explained that if they were going to be having tea, it would be better to do it without the hut stinking of yeti.)

Hagrid was grinning and waving goodbye to the students. Crabbe and Goyle were both walking funny as they headed back toward the castle, and Harry winced, watching them. They'd been stupid, of course, which was why they were injured, but that was nothing new for them. He and Ron and Hermione bustled around the dark, crowded hut, helping get the tea ready while Hagrid went out back to retrieve Fang from the pumpkin patch. (Poor Fang hadn't wanted to be in the hut with the yeti.) When Fang

entered he made right for Harry, leaping up and licking his face enthusiastically while Harry grinned and removed his very wet glasses, rubbing Fang behind his ears and trying not to wince.

They were all seated around the fire, drinking their tea and talking animatedly about the students' reactions to the yeti when suddenly Hermione caught sight of her watch and leapt up excitedly. "Oh, dear! I completely forgot! I told Ruth and Tony I'd help them with some dueling practice!"

"Aw, Hermione, does it have to be now?" Ron whinged.

"I promised. Somehow I forgot when Harry said about tea. I'm dreadfully sorry, Hagrid. And I volunteered your help, too, Ron. Tony wants some practice going up against someone with *exceptional* reflexes."

"But — but —" Ron sputtered as Hermione dragged him to his feet and out the door.

"We'll have to do this again, Hagrid!" she called over her shoulder as they left.

"Tha's all right, Hermione. Harry an' I'll have ourselves a right nice tea. Have fun!"

But Ron and Hermione had only been gone for five minutes when a brown owl began beating itself silly against one of Hagrid's windows. He looked surprised and went to the window, muttering. When he had taken a parchment from the bird's leg and unrolled it, he looked up at Harry sighing. "Looks like I'm abandonin' ye, too. Miss Dougherty here says Professor Snape is in the middle of workin' on a very delicate potion and `e needs some newts. `E's all out, and she can't get down here and back to the castle in time. I reckon this won't take me too long. You wait here — I'll be back in a shake."

After Hagrid left with a small cage of newts, it suddenly occurred to Harry that he could have offered to send the newts to the Potions dungeon by banishing them. (For that matter, he thought, Snape could have fetched them himself by summoning them. He didn't have to bother Hagrid.)

He drank his tea, sitting back and watching the fire, waiting for Hagrid to return. It was strange being alone; he realized suddenly that he almost never was. He was with Ron and Hermione usually, or if they had gone off to be together, he was in the Gryffindor common room with the other students in his house. He went running with seven other people, ate in the Great Hall, and even Malfoy and Tony (and Ron) were usually in the

prefects' bathroom when he was showering after running in the morning. He slept in a dorm with four other people. "Alone", was not usually a word that described him.

Suddenly, sitting in Hagrid's hut by himself with just the sound of the crackling fire, his isolation felt quite eerie, and he started to feel more than a little nervous. When the back door of the hut suddenly swung open, he leapt to his feet with his wand drawn and the person who'd entered gasped and backed up against the wall.

It was Ginny.

Harry sighed and lowered his wand, trying to get his breath. "Ginny! You startled me!"

As she closed the door, she said, "*I startled you?*" Then she turned to him with a smile. "This was supposed to be a surprise, but a *pleasant* one. Perhaps I should have told Hermione to tip you off."

"Hermione did this?"

"And my sister helped, too. She sent Hagrid a note about some newts."

"Ah. Right", he nodded, realizing how the conspiracy had been done. He pocketed his wand and smiled at her. "It's nice that we have so many people helping us to be alone, but you're still standing over there, and I'm over here..."

They moved toward each other simultaneously and Harry wasn't certain whose arms were thrown around whom first, he just knew that he was holding Ginny and kissing her, that her fingers were in his hair, holding his head in place while she drank him in, and everything felt all right again now that they were together. Ginny broke the kiss and smiled up at him.

"What were you doing before I came in? Sitting by the fire? That looks nice..."

She led him back to the fire and he sat again in the huge Hagrid-sized leather armchair, in which the two of them could easily have sat side-by-side (with space to spare) if they wished. Instead, Ginny sat beside him with her legs over his lap, and he leaned in again, catching her lips with his, kissing her softly at first, then lightly running his tongue along her lower lip, making her drop her jaw and pull him to her. As they continued to kiss, he ran his hand up to her knee, under her robes and skirt, then back down to her feet, pulling off her shoes without untying them. She sighed

and squirmed a little, her feet flinching as he ran his fingers over the insteps, then traced the arch of one foot with his thumb.

"Ticklish?" he asked mischievously as he kissed along her jaw, then blew lightly in her ear. She melted against him, guiding his lips to her neck by twining her fingers in his hair.

"Yes", she admitted. "But I don't care. It feels — oh!" She couldn't speak any more as he moved his lips along her neck, nipping lightly at the throbbing pulse-point, while his fingers danced over her feet and her breathing became more and more ragged. Harry moved his hand farther up her leg; she stiffened and he moved it back down to her calf, worried that he'd gone too far too fast, but then she put her hand on his and guided it back where it had been.

He froze, about to ask whether she was sure, but now her hand was moving up *his* leg, higher and higher, until finally he choked out, "Um, Ginny —"

"Mmm?" she murmured dreamily, continuing to move her hand in lazy circles on his thigh.

"I — I have a couple of — of concerns", he gasped when her hand made a very sudden move before retreating again. She murmured softly at him again, her lips brushing his jaw. He cleared his throat. "First", he said, "we don't really know how soon Hagrid's going to be walking in that door again. Sandy sometimes tells me these things, but I didn't wear her to come out this afternoon, as it's so cold."

She looked up at him with a sly half-smile. "Yes, we do know how soon Hagrid might be back. Maggie promised me that she'd keep Hagrid in the Potions dungeon, talking about cooking, until at least —" she twisted around and looked at his watch; "— five thirty."

"Cooking?" he laughed, hugging her tightly. "What's she going to do? Ask him for his recipe for rock cakes?"

"If necessary", she answered, with a very large grin.

Harry lowered his face until it was a fraction of an inch from hers. "I'm so glad I found you a sister. She's *far* more helpful than any of your brothers..."

She started to laugh at that, but he cut her off, catching her lips with his again. She opened her mouth, her warm tongue flicking out against his. He began moving his hand up her leg again, and groaned when she placed

her hand where it had previously been. However, he suddenly remembered that he wasn't done with his list.

"Oh, right", he said, separating his mouth from hers with difficulty. "The second thing. I'm, erm, not really sure how far we — erm, what I mean to say is — have you had a chance — to go see Madam Pomfrey?"

"*Oh, no*", she breathed, a panicky look in her eye. Harry nodded grimly, taking his hand out from under her robes and smoothing them down over her lap.

"Ah", he said, his chest tight with disappointment. "In that case, we need to exercise some self-con —" He noticed that Ginny didn't seem to be listening, although her eyes were very wide, looking over his shoulder. He turned and saw a pale face under very pale hair looking in at the window.

"*Bloody hell*," he spat. "Get up, Ginny", he said quickly. She scrambled to her feet and he pushed past her to the door.

"Wait up, Harry! I have to put my shoes back on!"

"Use magic!" he called over his shoulder to her as he rushed out the door of the hut, following the fresh footsteps through some new-fallen snow. *The storm must have started when we were in the hut*, he realized. They'd been too preoccupied to notice that snow was starting to fall. Harry's teeth were clacking together in the icy wind.

"Draco!" he cried into the wind, walking with difficulty. When he caught up to the Slytherin, his pale hair disappearing against the whirling snow, he touched his shoulder. Draco Malfoy stiffened, then turned, his face ruddy from the wind, his grey eyes blazing with fury. He pulled his arm back suddenly, and before Harry knew what was happening, he found himself on the cold ground, his jaw aching. He could taste blood. It had been so quick he was having trouble digesting it. He put his hand to his aching jaw and winced; where Malfoy's fist had made contact, the skin was raw and sensitive. The cold made it sting even more. He looked up at the other boy, incredulous.

"You *hit* me!" he couldn't help exclaiming in shock. Malfoy sneered at him, although he also looked like he might want to cry.

"You're as quick as ever, Potter. Which isn't saying much", he drawled. It sounded forced.

Harry struggled to his feet; the wind had died down momentarily. "Listen, Draco —"

"No!" he cried suddenly. "You do *not* call me that! Friends use first names. We are not friends, *Potter!*" Harry swallowed and tried to put his hand on Malfoy's arm, but it was knocked away. "Don't you touch me, you — you — *false friend.*"

Harry looked at him helplessly; he could see the loss in Draco Malfoy's eyes, behind the anger, as though Harry's betrayal were far worse than Ginny's. "I'm not a false friend", he said levelly, although even to him it sounded hollow. "And I've made no secret of how I still feel about Ginny. I never lied to you about that."

"Oh, no, but you did let me think she wanted nothing to do with you. Ah, well, here she comes now. I don't know why I'm surprised; I gave her her acting training, now didn't I? Isn't *that* coming back to bite me?" he snapped. Ginny stood before them, her cloak pulled tightly around her. Her mouth was drawn very thin. "I should have known you couldn't stay angry with *him*, if you ever were", he said, speaking to her now. "This is Harry-bleeding-Potter we're talking about, after all. The one you were thinking about every second we were together!" She looked down and away. His anger escalated. "You don't even bother to deny it now! God, how *stupid* was I to think a Gryffindor would ever really stoop to being with a Slytherin? You were just slumming with me, weren't you? Women!" he spat at her.

Harry didn't say anything; they'd both deceived him, it was true. Draco Malfoy turned his ire on Harry again.

"And *you!* Trying to make me think you were pining away for her! God, now I know how Weasley felt when he found out about you and Granger. Is that how you make friends, Potter? Sneaking around behind those friends' backs with the girls you know they fancy? Isn't *that* friendly?"

"I didn't know, honestly!" Harry said at last. The wind howled in his ears. "I only found out how she felt about me at Christmas. I wanted to tell you, I did! Because I *do* think of you as my friend —"

"No! You don't think of *me* as your friend. You think of *him* as your friend, the *other* me, the me who thought it was just *lov-er-ly* that you and Ginny were together. You seem to have us confused. Just because *he* was your mate in that other life, you think we're supposed to be friends in *this* life. And I suppose that because you were shagging that other Ginny, you think you're supposed to shag *her* —"

Harry turned, hoping the wind had carried Draco Malfoy's words away, hoping that Ginny hadn't heard that. But he looked at her face now; she stared at Malfoy, her jaw slack. Then she turned to Harry, looking very hurt. "Is — is that true, Harry?"

Harry felt his heart pounding in his ears. "No! I loved you in this life before —"

"I don't mean that, Harry. I mean about — what he said you did — in your other life —" She couldn't go on, but continued to look at him with very wide eyes, which grew angrier and angrier, until the fire in those brown eyes surpassed that in Draco Malfoy's. "And *he* knows? You told *him*?" she hissed, pointing a shaking finger.

Draco Malfoy burst into laughter, the sound blending with the wind's howls. "You still haven't told her! Ha! I don't think she's acting this time, Potter." He was enjoying himself now. "She looks quite — *cross*", he said with his eyes wide open in innocence, as though looking for the word that would produce the most extreme understatement. With a sneer, he turned away from Harry and began to walk up the snowy lawn to the castle. Harry watched him go for a half a minute, hovering between him and the irate Ginny, then ran after him. After a moment he realized that the footsteps he heard meant Ginny was running after *him*.

"Draco!" he cried. "Please, you have to understand —"

Malfoy turned, his wand in his hand. Harry froze, the tip of the wand inches from his face. Ginny stopped short too, at his elbow. "I understand that I was too trusting. I understand that you just take what you want with no regard for anyone else. You sound more like a Slytherin than I do, frankly. I think that needs to change. I think I need to start living up to my house's reputation. It's time I started acting like a *real* Slytherin again!" He put his wand away and turned back toward the castle, his shoulders squared against the wind..

Harry watched him go, a lump in his throat. He was startled when Ginny put her hand on his arm. Her bright red hair was full of snow, so that she almost looked like an old woman, although her face was still young and unlined. "We should get indoors, Harry", she said simply. He put his arm around her shoulders and together they walked toward the castle, ducking their heads into the wind, and when they were inside the entrance hall, they found that Draco Malfoy had already gone down to the dungeons. They were alone.

Ginny looked helplessly at him; she was drawn and pale under the ruddiness that the wind had temporarily given her. Harry gestured with his head. "Let's go somewhere more private to talk." She didn't respond but followed him to the anteroom just off the Great Hall. When the door to the room was closed, he started to speak, but she stopped him.

"I don't think I want to hear whatever justifications you've come up with between Hagrid's hut and this room. I just — I just want you to understand what's really upsetting me", she said softly, her eyes meeting his, full of hurt. "Or rather, perhaps I should start with what's *not* upsetting me. Do Ron and Hermione know?" He shook his head, swallowing. She nodded with understanding. "Yeah. You didn't tell them when you showed them the Pensieve. I get that. Ron would have had kittens and Hermione — well, it would have hurt her a great deal." He nodded this time. "And so, when I was using the amulet to watch you in the Pensieve, I didn't find out either. I also understand why you didn't tell me when they weren't around. It would be rather — awkward."

"I — I already had to tell the Hermione in my other life what kind of relationship we'd had in *this* one, and I just — I didn't want to go through that again. The hardest part was admitting that although Hermione and I loved each other, we weren't *in* love..."

"Please, Harry", she said, putting her hand up. She sighed, then continued. "All right; I understand *completely* why you didn't tell Ron, Hermione or me. I get that, I really do. What I *don't* understand, especially as you said how awkward it was talking to the other Hermione, is how on earth you could tell *him*, of all people!" Harry saw that she was shaking head to foot, and he longed to take her in his arms, but did not. He drew his lips into a line and looked at her contritely. "I mean — you — you have no idea —"

And then she started crying in earnest, and he couldn't remain apart from her, he had to take her in his arms and pull her head onto his shoulder while she wept quietly, her arms holding him as though she might drown otherwise. "Having him know this — it simply makes me feel *violated*, Harry. By him. All over again —"

He held her at arm's length and stared at her. "*What?*"

"No — I don't mean he *actually* violated me. I mean that he made me *feel* violated, repeatedly. The first time you know about, when you found us in the Potions Dungeon on Ron's sixteenth birthday... The worst times

were — were after he had the amulet. He would —" Her voice dropped to a whisper; Harry had to strain to hear it. "He would tell me that he'd been lying in bed watching me sleep while holding the amulet, and he'd — he'd describe what he was doing while he was watching me —" She shuddered again. "Usually he'd tell me that after he'd tried again to get me to sleep with him. Revenge. He knew how it made me feel, to know he was watching me like that. Spying on me. He told me it hardly mattered whether I took my clothes off for him in person, as he'd seen me many times in the shower and bath —" She put her head down on Harry again and he ached inside that he'd made this possible by giving Draco Malfoy the amulets.

"I'm so sorry, Ginny. I — I didn't know how bad it was..."

"I know you didn't, Harry. I didn't like to speak of it. I just had to carry on, pretending to love him, to be his girlfriend. I had to put up with his humiliating me in private and act as though nothing was wrong when we were around other people. I asked him to stop, but I couldn't be very insistent, because I was still trying to protect you. I had — I had these nightmares, about Tom, only Tom's face became Draco's..."

"Tom?" Harry said, alarmed. "He — he didn't —"

Ginny shook her head. "Oh, he was incapable of laying a finger on me, as he wasn't corporeal until he left the diary. And I doubt that he would have done anything down in the Chamber, as he couldn't risk my waking up. He might have lost some of his strength. No, he — he did things like Draco, earlier, when I was writing in the diary. He'd tell me things that were — rather disturbing for an eleven-year-old girl. Things he'd done. With other girls. And alone. And once he took me into the diary and *showed* me; somehow he was controlling me so that I couldn't close my eyes in order not to see it. I had no choice. And he asked me whether seeing those things made me excited. Draco did that later and I had to try very hard not to spew, it was so like Tom. It was all more than a little unnerving — what both of them did. I know now that Tom was trying to shake me up. Draco, too. Well, it worked. And then he'd do something else Draco did later, apologize and beg me to continue talking to him. And I would, against my better judgment, because he had rather mesmerized me... At least I can truly say that Draco did *not* do that. My staying with him was voluntary; I would have done anything to keep you safe."

"Well", he said softly, stroking her cheek. "Not *anything*. You didn't, after all. That's one reason why he's upset."

She nodded. "I'd say 'I'm sorry', but I know you didn't want me to do that either, even for the sake of greater realism. I'm glad it never went that far. At least that's one less thing he can hold over my head. He can say he's seen me in plenty of private moments, but never *that* kind of private moment. Thank goodness."

She wiped her eyes on her sleeve and stepped back from him. "I'm tired of Draco Malfoy playing mind games with me. I'm tired of feeling violated, and like others know things about me that even *I* don't know. And now I find out that you — you slept with the me in your other life, and you couldn't be bothered to tell *me*, but you told *him*. Did you really think he was going to be your friend if you did that?"

Harry looked down at his shoes. "Maybe. I was obviously wrong. It was stupid..."

"When was it?"

Harry looked up at her. "It was when I told him about my other life."

"No, I mean —" She swallowed. "When did we sleep together?"

"Oh. Um, it was the night we spent together in the Quidditch changing rooms. During the blizzard."

She nodded. "That makes sense. All right, then. Put that in the Pensieve. I'll look at it tomorrow morning."

"Wh — what?" he sputtered.

She looked at him shrewdly. "I think I have a right to know about this, Harry. Although I must admit —" She was whispering again. "I always thought that the first time we slept together, it would be the first time for both of us to be together that way. Not the first time for me and the *second* time for you. Unless you slept with the other me more than once —"

He shook his head. "No. After we came back to the castle, you went into hiding. That was the only time we had a chance —" he choked out. "And that's why, when I fixed the timelines —" She looked at him, stricken.

"Oh. Right." But when he made a move to take her in his arms again, she backed up. "I think — I think I need some time alone, Harry." She looked up at him. "I want to see the Pensieve, because I think I have that right. And I know that I'll get over this. I love you and I want to be with you. But — I think expecting me to get past this in a matter of minutes

isn't quite fair." He nodded in agreement. She swallowed and turned toward the door. "All right then. We agree. I'll eat breakfast early tomorrow. When everyone's left your dorm, come and get me in the common room. I'll look at that night in the Pensieve."

She left, closing the door softly behind her. Harry sank down onto the floor, running his hand through his hair. *He'd made her feel violated.* The idea haunted him, remembering as he did carrying her to the hospital wing, when he'd thought that Draco Malfoy had attempted to ravish her in the Potions dungeon. It turned out he'd come rather close. But somehow, he wondered whether all of Ginny's efforts to protect him were now for naught, because Malfoy saw them in Hagrid's hut. The words of the boy he'd tried to befriend rang in his ears. He knew that he had to heed what he'd said:

I think I need to start living up to my house's reputation. It's time I started acting like a real Slytherin again!

Harry swallowed and went to the door. He'd been trying to make a friend, and instead — he had resurrected an enemy.

* * *

When Ginny emerged from the Pensieve the next morning, she looked somewhat thoughtful. She sat down on Ron's trunk and looked down at her hands, rather than up at Harry. He sat opposite her, on his own trunk, waiting for her to say something.

"Is that why you didn't want to tell me?" she finally said, still not looking at him. "Were you — afraid I wouldn't want to sleep with you in this life if I knew how it went that night? That morning, rather."

Harry felt himself redden. "Well — I reckon that was part of it. I also didn't know how you'd feel about it having happened in general. As you said yesterday, our first time wouldn't really be *our* first time because of this..."

She finally looked up at him, eyeing him thoughtfully. "You were thinner. And taller. And I still can't get used to the idea of you without the scar." Her voice was very quiet. He tried not to think about her in the Pensieve, looking at his body. The thought was too distracting. "I was very thin, as well."

"Too thin", he agreed. "It was unhealthy. That's why — why you thought you were going to have a baby. That and the fact that you hadn't had the potion."

She tried to smile a little. "I have a healthy appetite, with all the running and dueling training. In fact, I keep feeling like I should work out more diligently, lose a little weight. Especially after Mum has sent one of her cakes, or some fudge —"

"Don't say that!" he exclaimed, smiling at her. "You're lovely. You could even stand to *gain* some more weight, as far as I'm concerned. I don't want you to blow away on the wind."

She guffawed. "Little danger of that." She paused. "Is it possible that you didn't tell me — because you didn't want to repeat that at all? In this life?"

His jaw dropped. "No!"

She grimaced. "I had to ask. Sometimes — I'm still not sure whether I'm dreaming. You want to be with me. Harry Potter actually wants to be with me. You don't know how many times Tom told me that I should forget you, that I was more like him, that you'd never be with someone who'd kill roosters and release a basilisk and lie about it... I believed him, of course. I think that was still at the back of my mind when I started seeing Draco. I remembered what Tom said about me, what I deserved, and whether you would ever notice me, which he said was very unlikely, but not in such kind words. Draco said as much; They were both always saying *Potter would never understand you, appreciate you. You're supposed to be with someone like me...*"

"And you believed them? Oh, Ginny, is that why you did all that to make me believe you hated me? Because you thought that's who you were and had no choice? God! What did they do to you? How could they make you believe that you *had* to be that person?" He shook his head. "Remember Viktor? Poor Viktor bought what his grandfather told him, that he *had* to be a certain way because of his blood, his line. But that's not true. We always have choices, Ginny, every one of us. I botched this up because I chose to tell Draco and not you. I was incredibly stupid. But you don't have to act anymore. You don't have to pretend to love Draco Malfoy or hate me. He knows; he knows now and we're just going to have to deal with that. But most importantly — you can stop believing you're someone who *has* to be with a Draco Malfoy or a Tom Riddle. You're *not* like them. Not if you *choose* not to be."

She looked up at him gratefully, looking like she might cry. "I'll try to work on that, then. But — maybe I need to do that on my own. Some time

to really think about who I am. And — and to get over Draco knowing about —"

He nodded. "Right. Of course. Take all the time you need. I love you; that won't change."

She smiled through her tears at him. He could wait. They would be fine. His heart ached when he thought of the psychological manipulations of both Tom Riddle and Draco Malfoy, the way they'd convinced her to devalue herself, to be like *them*.

They both jumped when the door suddenly burst open and Ron rushed excitedly into the room. Harry sprung to his feet guiltily, speaking very quickly. "We weren't doing anything! We're both fully clothed! We weren't even touching!"

Ron stopped short, looking back and forth between the two of them and looking mystified. "A bit paranoid, aren't we, Harry? If you *had* been doing anything, I would have known before I came up the stairs, trust me." Then Ron shook himself. "Listen, you weren't down at breakfast, when the post owls came with the papers, so I just had to run up and tell you —"

"What?" they said in unison. Ron had the largest grin Harry had ever seen on him.

"The Gringotts siege is over! All of the Death Eaters turned themselves in, and the goblins are asking for immunity in exchange for their testimony against the Death Eaters. They might not all get it. But here's the best part — Remus had been the operative in charge of the Gringotts stand-off. The other operatives all answered to him, and Aurors from the Ministry were working with the operatives at last, too, as they weren't getting anywhere on their own. Well, when they turned themselves in, they *insisted* that it be to Remus, so he's getting the credit for the entire stand-off ending! He's a bloody hero! Anyway, the Great Hall is a madhouse. It's fantastic, like a huge party. You have to come down!"

He pulled Harry to the door and Ginny followed. Ron was not exaggerating; when they were still several flights up from the Great Hall they could hear the racket, and when he reached the source of the noise he thought he would go deaf. It was a mystery to him how Ron was able to stand it, with his extra-sensitive werewolf hearing.

The students and teachers were thronging the hall without regard to house tables. People were hugging each other and jumping about excitedly. Someone was punching the air and crying out, "Take that, Death Eaters!"

And Seamus stood on the Gryffindor table and held up the front page of the *Prophet*. The headline was huge:

DEATH EATERS SURRENDER TO WEREWOLF
GRINGOTTS SIEGE ENDS PEACEFULLY

The photograph on the front page showed Remus Lupin waving his wand to shackle two Death Eaters. "Score one for the werewolves!" Seamus crowed, raising Ron's arm into the air, while Ron grinned uncontrollably and hugged Hermione with his other arm. She was laughing, clearly glad to see Ron so happy, and when she saw Harry and Ginny, she hugged Ginny, grinning, and then threw herself at Harry.

"Oh, Harry! Isn't it wonderful?" she shouted in his ear, so he could hear her above the din. "And Minister Fudge says that Remus is going to get the Order of Merlin! That's completely unheard-of for a werewolf!"

Harry looked around; a number of people were cheering for "Professor Lupin". He grinned; Remus had been a very popular teacher during the two years-Harry's third and sixth — that he'd taught Defense Against the Dark Arts. He shouted at Hermione, "Maybe if Mrs. Figg doesn't stay another year, Remus can get his teaching job back."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think he'll want it. The *Prophet* is full of speculation that he's going to be offered a very high-ranking post in the Ministry. It's about time the rest of the wizarding world found out how wonderful he is, instead of just us! Oh, Harry, this could do *wonders* for werewolves' reputations!" Her eyes were shining as she regarded Ron again, who was surrounded by Will Flitwick, Jamaica Thomas, Dean Thomas, Neville and Seamus, who were all patting Ron on the back and talking loudly about Remus Lupin being their favorite teacher ever. Ginny grinned at her brother and he enfolded her in a hug that looked slightly painful; she had her hand on her lower back and was smiling less enthusiastically when he released her.

Harry already felt tired from the celebrating. Hermione looked at him, concerned. "Are you all right, Harry?"

He shrugged. "I'll be fine. Ginny and I are having a rough patch, is all. Well, not a rough patch so much as — we're taking a little break."

Hermione looked disappointed. "A break from *what*, precisely? And after what Maggie and I went through yesterday to —"

"Yes. Thanks for that. But in a way — well, that's part of why we're doing this. See, Draco Malfoy knows about us now. He saw us down at Hagrid's hut. And then he told Ginny — he told her that I'd slept with her in my other life."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "He told her what? You did? And *he* knows? Oh, God, Harry." She looked at his face, frowning, then held his jaw with her right hand and surveyed the raw skin where Draco Malfoy had hit him. "Is that where this came from? I'd like to kick his —"

A roaring chorus of *For Lupin's a Jolly Good Fellow* drowned out her comment, but when he bent and put his head closer to her mouth, he could make out the next thing she said. "And why would he tell her that you two had slept together in your other life? What made him think she'd believe that?" Harry looked at her guiltily and her jaw dropped. "You never said —"

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I was showing you and Ron my Pensieve at the same time. How do you think he'd react to that? Not to mention, well, I wasn't too keen on telling you either. Ginny understands why I didn't tell the two of you, and even why I didn't tell her. She's upset that I told Draco Malfoy."

Hermione had turned quite pink and she nodded. "Yes", she said shortly. "I can see where she'd be upset by that." Her mouth was drawn very thin, and Harry hoped she didn't hate him now. She glanced at Ginny and then back at Harry. "So —?"

"So I need to give Ginny a little space. She says she has no doubt she'll get over this, but not in the blink of an eye. Which is understandable. And she needs some time to think about some other things, too."

Hermione snorted. "Understandable? I'll say." Then she sought out the Slytherin table, which was hard to see for the thronging students and teachers. "I don't see Malfoy celebrating the liberation of Gringotts. Nor any of the Slytherins, for that matter."

Harry searched the crowd with his eyes as well. "No. Did they all leave before Ginny and I came down?"

Hermione shrugged. "Could be. After people started opening their newspapers, it became mayhem pretty quickly. I wonder whether any of them have parents who turned themselves in. Death Eaters. If I had a mum or dad who had just been arrested, even if I didn't think they were right, I doubt I'd be celebrating."

Harry nodded. "Right. I'm just a bit surprised not to see Millicent, or Mariah. For Slytherins, they're not bad."

Hermione nodded. "But I think that's largely because they like Draco. Millicent — well, she's never had any hope. Sad, really. Draco absolutely takes advantage of her. Do you know I think he gets her to do his homework quite a lot? And Mariah, well —" She guffawed. "He takes advantage of *her* in a slightly different way. But let's face it — both Millicent and Mariah are screwed, no matter which way you look at it."

"Hermione!" he said, shocked at her language. Not that he didn't say far worse, but he wasn't accustomed to her speaking like this. She laughed.

"After almost seven years, you and Ron have been a terrible influence on me. What can I say? Do you think people would fall over in shock if I said something like that during a prefects' meeting?" She was grinning at him. He laughed.

"Probably." Then he thought of Mariah again. "I do think he cares about Mariah, though. She may not have been his first choice, but she helped Ginny, and Ginny thinks she's a good person. Maybe if he ever realizes what a good thing he has in her, she can help keep him —"

"— from becoming a complete pawn of Voldemort? That would be nice, but we'd hoped that of Ginny, too, didn't we?"

"Mariah is with him because she really cares about him, though, not because she's trying to protect someone else, as Ginny was with me", he reminded her.

"Yes, but if she really cares about him, she could wind up going along with whatever he decides to do. She doesn't want him to refuse an order from Voldemort and die. I doubt she does, anyway." Hermione's voice shook. Then she grinned again as Ron grabbed her hand and whirled her away, while someone started singing the Chudley Cannons fight song, laughing and clapping. Harry let himself be swept into the crowd celebrating Remus Lupin's magnificent capture of over twenty-five Death Eaters. But as he did so, he felt rather empty, watching the celebration rage

on around him. *I can still hope, can't I?* he thought. *Maybe the love of a good woman will save Draco Malfoy yet.*

* * *

But just over three weeks later, Malfoy was still not interested in being Harry's friend, Ginny was still working through her Riddle and Malfoy issues, not making any attempt to spend any time alone with him, Sirius was cross with him after he told him that Draco had found out about him and Ginny, and nothing else good had come of the Gringotts siege being over. There were a large number of Death Eaters to be processed and tried. The ringleaders were going to be tried together; the subordinates would have a separate trial. And soon Alicia's father's trial would begin, which promised to go badly. Or at least, predictably.

Crabbe and Goyle were hanging about with Draco Malfoy again. Millicent and Mariah were still hanging about with him too, so now where he had a gang of three when he was younger, now he was a leader of sorts amongst the five of them, strutting about with one arm draped over Mariah's shoulders while Crabbe and Goyle walked behind, each trying to put *their* arms around Millicent, in a similar fashion, while she beat them off with a look of disgust on her face and an expression of longing aimed at Draco Malfoy. Harry had to be very careful now, for in many of his classes Malfoy's full time occupation had become to prank and irk him at every turn. Putting wrong ingredients in his potions, casting a Contrary Charm on the chair Harry was trying to Transfigure in McGonagall's class, and simply doing puerile things like tripping Harry as he entered the Great Hall for a meal were among the amusements Draco Malfoy had taken up. Harry wanted to take house points for these things, and he could have, but he restrained himself. He would not deign to notice the aggravating things Malfoy was doing. He wouldn't. After he'd been tripped and was lying, sprawled, on the cold stone floor of the Great Hall before the entire school, Mariah mouthed, *Sorry*, before following Malfoy to the Slytherin table. Harry worried for her. Had Malfoy done the same thing to her he'd already done to Ginny? Did she think she had no *choice* but to be with Draco Malfoy?

Harry was glad to have the Quidditch match against Ravenclaw to focus on. The first Saturday in February was frigid but without a new fall of snow. The air was crisp and cold as the Gryffindor team made their way to the changing rooms, and when Ron was pacing the floor of the

team meeting room, Harry met Ginny's eye and she reddened, looking away. *It was here*, he thought, looking at the leather couch where Tony, Neville and Dean were sitting. He thought Ginny might be thinking the same as she glanced up at the house banners hanging on the walls; if it weren't for those banners, they would have been much colder that night.

Finally, they were on the pitch, and when the game started, Harry started flying rings around the second-year boy who had replaced Cho Chang as Ravenclaw Seeker. Soon Ron was doing his usual job of racking up points, as he sent the Quaffle hurtling into one goal or another at the Ravenclaw end of the pitch. The crowd was split in its cheering; about half were Gryffindor and Hufflepuff students cheering for Gryffindor, while about half were Ravenclaw and Slytherin students cheering for Ravenclaw. Harry saw Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner very briefly, sitting near Millicent Bulstrode. All three of them were on their feet when one of the Ravenclaw Beaters sent a Bludger toward Neville. Neville, however, raised his Beater's bat and propelled it toward one of the Ravenclaw Chasers.

Ginny allowed three Quaffles to get past her in the time that Ron had put twelve past the Ravenclaw Keeper, but Harry still hadn't seen the Snitch. It was tempting to hover near his own goals, watching her. When he finally gave in to this temptation temporarily, he found himself rewarded by seeing a glimpse of gold out of the corner of his eye. Ginny saw it too.

"Harry —" she started to say, but he was already speeding toward it, down near the far goal post, twenty feet off the ground. He had to chase it in circles around the post before grasping it — which made him dizzy — but when he finally had it in his hand, he breathed a sigh of relief and flew upward again to see Ginny, the Snitch held high over his head. But she wasn't there; she'd flown forward to meet the other Gryffindor players, and they were all congratulating each other without Harry, until he finally joined them.

Afterward, the party in the Gryffindor common room went on for hours, during which Harry just watched Ginny, sitting on the opposite side of the room drinking a butterbeer and wanting her so badly. He'd hugged her briefly right after the game, but he'd only dared to dance with her once during the party. The wizarding wireless was playing mostly raucous music, and he'd had to wait for a soft, slow song. She'd looked down at his

shirt the entire time, keeping her distance. Afterward, Zoey had pulled her away, making some excuse, and he had watched her go, feeling bereft.

Harry stayed in the common room long after the others had all gone up to their respective dorms, trying to focus on the good things from the day. He sat with his feet stretched out toward the fire, thinking about the match and grinning. The entire team had been brilliant; Ron, Annika, Natalie, Tony, even Neville. And Ginny, especially Ginny. He remembered his own experience as a Keeper; not the easiest thing in the world, after being a Seeker, but for the most part she kept those Quaffles out of the goals with a single-bloody-mindedness that had proved impossible to beat, combined with Ron's Chaser prowess and his snagging the Snitch, of course...

He remembered the way she'd felt in his arms when the entire team had been hugging after the win, how hard it had been *not* to kiss her as he had that time in his fifth year when Hermione had stomped on his foot... Even though she wouldn't have done that if he *had* kissed Ginny (Hermione was too busy hugging Ron), he somehow didn't feel like repeating it. He felt like Pavlov's dog, effectively warned away for life from kissing Ginny Weasley after Quidditch matches. And he hadn't felt that Ginny would welcome a kiss at that moment, either.

He heard a step on the stairs and thought about turning around, but he was so tired he just continued to watch the flames and lean against the chair. He immediately felt every nerve in his body stand to attention when he heard the soft voice.

"Harry? What are you doing up?"

He didn't turn to look at her; it was hard enough to see her, day in and day out, without seeing her late at night, too. If he hadn't been so stupid and just *told* her about what had happened in the Quidditch changing rooms...

"I'm — I'm just a bit wired still. The match. I'll probably go up soon. Why are you up?" He tried to sound casual.

"I've got a dreadful ache in my neck from grasping my broomstick so hard during the match. It's just that I have to fly with one hand, and so the hand I'm not using to catch the Quaffle... well, Zoey practically had to pry my hand from the broomstick, and I could feel the strain all along my arm, and shoulders..."

"So you couldn't sleep?"

"Well, that and I thought I'd go to see Madam Pomfrey for some kind of salve, anything to take this pain away..."

Harry took a breath before speaking, knowing he was taking a huge risk of being laughed at or scorned. "Maybe — maybe I can help. Come here." He turned to look at her now. She was wearing her old grey dressing gown over a long pink nightgown and dirty pink slippers. Her hair was wild and her eyes looked a little bleary, as though she'd tried to get some sleep and the pain wouldn't let her. She walked tentatively to the fire, and Harry opened his legs and patted the hearth rug before him. She started to sit down facing him, looking unsure, but he said, "No; face the fire." She turned her back to him and sat between his legs, and he felt her shudder for a moment.

He gathered her hair together and twisted it into a thick rope which he draped over her shoulder so it was out of the way. He put his hands on both of her shoulders, starting to knead the muscles there and along her upper back and upper arms. But the dressing gown material was bunching annoyingly, and after a few minutes, he asked her, "Can I take your dressing gown from your shoulders?" She nodded, saying nothing, and he brought the dressing gown down and pulled her arms out of the sleeves. Her nightdress did not actually have sleeves, just thin little straps holding it up, and Harry sucked in his breath, unprepared for this sight. He tried to be clinical about it and return to the massaging, but the longer he looked at that tantalizing little freckle on the back of her neck, the more he wanted to lick it...

As he moved his hands over her flesh, he felt her muscles eventually unbunch and at length, a light sheen arose on her neck and shoulders. He was aware of her breathing sounding different, and he moved his head to one side while he continued to knead her shoulders, trying to get a glimpse of her face. He could see her in profile, her eyes closed, her mouth slightly open, and he could see her chest rising and falling as her breathing sped up.

He stopped for a moment, both gratified to see that what he was doing was having an effect on her and afraid to do anything that would change this moment, alter the balance in any way. *Willpower*, he told himself. That's all you need. He resumed the massage, but a moment later he bit back a moan in his throat as her hands had wandered to her sides and found his legs. He tried to focus, he really did, but now, while he was

manipulating her muscles, she was lightly tracing her fingers up and down his legs, occasionally focusing on his very sensitive kneecaps. He was very thankful he was still fully clothed...

He moved his hands over her neck and shoulders and back on autopilot, trying not to think about what her softly caressing fingers were doing to his legs... But finally, he had to go and look at that damn freckle again, and found his mouth being drawn inexorably toward it...

She sucked in her breath when she felt his mouth on her neck, and he braced himself, waiting for her to put a stop to it. But she didn't; if anything, the action of her hands on his legs became more sensuous than ever and more frantic, until Harry couldn't help himself, and he moved his mouth from her neck to her shoulder and back again, both sides of her neck, nipping and kissing and sucking...

He had had to stop massaging her because the area where he was kissing was the same area where he had been massaging. Now he brought his hands lightly to her shoulders, tickling the skin there softly and letting his fingers continue down the backs of her upper arms, then the fronts, then focusing briefly on that supremely sensitive skin in the crooks of her elbows, then the backs of her upper arms again, his fingers lightly tracing her repeatedly as though he were blind and trying to memorize her, and the whole time, his mouth moved on her neck and shoulders and upper back and he thought he could never have enough of her smooth skin, that nothing had ever sounded so wonderful as her surprised gasp when he gave attention to a spot that had been languishing, Harry-less, until he traced over it with his tongue or nipped it lightly with his teeth...

Her hands were gripping his legs now instead of caressing as he continued to tickle her arms and lick her shoulder, and when she turned and looked at him, the moment their eyes met, Harry knew that she had forgiven him completely and that she probably wasn't going to run screaming into the night, either, because he'd told Malfoy that they'd slept together in his other life and had neglected to tell *her*.

Their hands stopped moving, and they looked into each other's eyes for what seemed an eternity. Finally, she turned around completely, kneeling on the hearth rug before him, not breaking eye contact for a moment. She put her hand on his cheek and he covered it with his own hand, knowing that he was her slave, that whatever command she gave him, to do this or

not do that, he would obey without question. If she demanded that he stop and never touch her again, he would have to agree...

But she was leaning toward him, and when their lips met, Harry was almost willing to believe it was a dream. She continued to press her lips against his, and now he brought his hands up behind her head and held her mouth in place, opening his, running his tongue lightly along her upper teeth, feeling her soft little tongue meet his, the heat almost undoing him completely. She relaxed on the floor in front of him, twining her fingers in his hair, opening her mouth wider; he shook, not completely certain he wasn't going to weep for joy, doing everything he could to make her a part of him, holding her tightly. He wasn't sure how long they'd been kissing when she gently pulled her mouth away from his, but she wasn't gone for long. She kissed both corners of his mouth, then moved her lips along his jaw, then up to his ear, sending an electric jolt through him. When she clamped her mouth on his neck, he closed his eyes, grunting, trying to calm himself a little; she was driving him mad.

Then her fingers started fluttering over his shirt buttons. She opened the shirt completely, separating from him and looking at his chest appreciatively, giving him a smile that had such raw desire behind it that he really wasn't certain he was awake now instead of dreaming. She moved her mouth down his chest as he continued to caress her shoulders and arms, and when she took his left nipple in her warm moist mouth he felt like he would lose all control and rip her clothes off if they didn't stop soon...

He tried to distance himself, as before. He really tried. But her hands and mouth were drifting over his torso and his breathing became ragged as she pushed him further and further to the point of no return. He looked down at her bright head; her mouth had traced a moist trail down to his trousers, and he knew that this couldn't continue; there was only one thing he wanted to do now, and he knew that they couldn't afford for things to go that far, since she hadn't yet taken the potion.

"Ginny", he whispered, and she brought her head up. He wanted to kiss her again, until she was gasping for breath, but instead he said, "We have to stop." She furrowed her brow. He took a breath. "If we don't — I may not be able to —"

He raised his eyebrows at her, and now she said, "Ooooh... with a look of understanding on her face. "Just put your head on me", he said, pulling

her to him so that her head was on his bare chest. "How are your arms and shoulders?"

"Mmmm", she practically purred with contentment. "Much better..."

Harry wrapped his arms around her, trying to quell the turmoil in his body, telling it, "*Not tonight, and Settle down*. He kissed the top of her head and rocked her back and forth ever so slightly, eventually hearing an odd whistling noise which he remembered was the sound of Ginny sleeping. Her nose whistled when she slept. He smiled to himself and kissed her cheek, then leaned his head back and closed his eyes. She had forgiven him. That was the important thing. Nothing else mattered.

* * *

In the morning, Harry was a bit disoriented. Ginny was stretched out on the hearth rug, her head on his thigh, and he was leaning back against the armchair. He ached all over and his bottom felt numb. He wanted to stand, but Ginny would need to be woken up for that. He closed his eyes again, not ready to really awaken, unwilling to trade being comfortable for a little more sleep. But then he saw something out of the corner of his eye that he couldn't ignore.

He was cautious, not wanting to scare her away; he watched her work, bustling around the room, fluffing cushions on the squashy armchairs, dusting tables, and finally, creeping near the fire, pointing her hand at it, making it glow with an extra warmth that Harry could feel immediately. Before she could get away, he reached out and grasped her wrist; she looked shocked, clearly having assumed that he was still asleep.

"Let go! Let go of me!" she squeaked, her brown eyes large and frightened.

"Winky, what are you doing here?"

She wore the same small black robes he'd seen her in at the Quidditch match, when she'd attended with Aberforth, her master. A master who paid her, evidently, and clothed her. She seemed to be past caring about that; all she wanted to do was work, and she was clearly allowed to do that. Then he remembered the flick of black he'd seen when he'd entered Alicia's rooms in the staff wing. Other elves did not wear black robes. He couldn't think of a single one of the elves he trained — even the ones who'd opted for clothes, freedom and a salary — who dressed like this. Only Winky.

"You've been here at the castle for a while, haven't you? You were preparing Alicia's rooms when she came. Why on earth are you here?" But

even as he asked, the answer blossomed in his brain. "Aberforth is here, isn't he? Your master. Tell me!"

She nodded, her eyes large and frightened. "Please, sir, I is needing to tend to more fires, sir", she said in such a high-pitched voice Harry suspected that dogs in the village would soon be howling. Or Fang. Or Ron.

He released her arm. "I'm sorry I frightened you, Winky. Of course you can —" She disappeared with a loud *crack!* before Harry had even finished; "— go", he trailed off. Ginny yawned and stretched; Harry wished they were in a more private place, preferably with a bed, and that she'd taken the Prophylaxis Potion. She looked so sensuous, the fabric of her nightgown shifting over her body as she stretched, her head still on Harry's thigh. *Stop having those thoughts. Stop having those thoughts*, he ordered himself. *There are more important things to think of right now.*

She finally opened her eyes and blinked sleepily, sitting up. "Oh, goodness! We slept all night down here on the floor?" Then she smiled and leaned toward him. "We never woke up next to each other before", she observed, smiling affectionately at him before giving him a small kiss on the lips. "At least not in this life. I think I can understand why the other me was feeling so randy after sleeping next to you all night with nothing on", she said with a throaty suggestiveness to her voice that was new to Harry, and was not making it easy to change his train of thought. Harry wanted to lift her chin with his finger and kiss her tenderly. He wanted to do a dozen things that didn't involve self-control. But this was neither the time nor place. "Were you shouting a moment ago, by the way?" she asked.

"Yeah. Listen, Ginny. I need you to go upstairs and get Hermione. Be as quick as you can. I'm going up to my dorm to get Ron. It's very important."

She frowned at him. "What is?"

He drew his mouth into a line. "It's about Dumbledore. Get Hermione, please!" She scrambled to her feet and went to the girls' stairs while he stumbled to his feet. It wasn't easy to wake Ron, but Harry finally convinced him to pull on his trainers and dressing gown and come downstairs. Ginny was waiting with Hermione; both girls pulled their dressing gowns securely around themselves and waited for Harry to tell them what was going on.

He looked at his two best friends and the girl he loved and said, "This may shock you, but this morning when I woke up, I found Winky tending the fire here in the common room. Winky!" he repeated when none of them showed any indication that this was an extraordinary discovery. "She works for *Aberforth* now! And I realized why she was here — the reason Professor Dumbledore has been so queer for so long now is that *that isn't Dumbledore!* It's his brother! Something we didn't tell you —" he looked guiltily at Ron and Ginny now; "— is that some time ago. Hermione and I were in Dumbledore's office when he didn't know it, and he wasn't actually in there but in his bed chamber, next door. He was lying abed and Professor McGonagall was talking to him; from the sound of it, he was doing something to fight Voldemort without actually leaving Hogwarts. And sometime since then, Aberforth has come to stay and has been impersonating him, I'm sure of it!" He stared at Ron and Hermione, who were now looking guiltily at each *other*. "What?" he asked them, irritated that they didn't say anything about his discovery.

"Well, erm, we already knew that, Harry", said Ron awkwardly. "The first day Aberforth showed up I sniffed him out. Literally. Dumbledore smells like a sweetshop. A bit overwhelming sometimes, actually, unless he's been eating his favorite sweet, which has a lemon scent and takes the edge off the sugary smell. Aberforth smells like earth and lawn-clippings. Completely different. I told Hermione right off, and she told me about that time you two heard him and McGonagall. We reckoned we shouldn't say anything, because if Aberforth's been impersonating his brother, it must be for a good reason, and the fewer people who knew the better, we reckoned."

Harry's jaw dropped. "You couldn't have told *me*?"

Hermione looked contrite. "I'm sorry, Harry. We wanted to, but we just didn't know what you would do. After all, he talked about how your scar wasn't hurting you. We worried that you might feel guilty..."

"Well I do feel bloody guilty! I'd also like to know what he's really doing! And I intend to find out!"

He turned and strode toward the portrait hole. The others followed him into the corridor; he was moving so quickly that only Ron kept up with him effortlessly. Despite all their running, Hermione and Ginny were struggling, and Hermione seemed to have developed a stitch in her side by the time they reached the gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore's office.

"*Chocolate Snidget*," Harry said clearly to the gargoyle. The passage opened and they ascended to the oaken door on the spiraling stairs. Harry did not bother knocking but simply opened it, striding across Dumbledore's unoccupied office to the bed chamber door.

"Harry! What do you think you're doing?" Hermione demanded, the lack of propriety finally getting to her. "It is before breakfast on a Sunday morning, and three of us are in our dressing gowns!"

Harry turned to her. "I am making sure our headmaster is all right. I don't know about you, but this is something I have to know!" He put his hand on the knob and opened the door.

Despite the early hour and its being Sunday, Dumbledore wasn't alone in the room. A man who looked remarkably like Albus Dumbledore whom Harry now realized was his brother Aberforth was sitting by the bed. He looked up, startled to see Harry and the others come stumbling into the room. At the foot of the bed stood Professor McGonagall, looking equally shocked by the invasion. But what caught Harry's attention was the occupant of the bed.

Lying back on simple linen sheets, with a damp cloth on his brow, was Albus Dumbledore. But he was an Albus Dumbledore who was virtually unrecognizable to them all. His breath rasped, echoing around the still chamber. Harry's heart was in his throat.

The headmaster looked like death.

Chamber

Dumbledore looked up at them from his bed. Harry drew in his breath; the blue eyes were flat, without a twinkle to be seen, and he wasn't wearing his half-moon spectacles. Harry wondered why for only a second; one look at Aberforth's face and he had found the familiar eyeglasses. Evidently Dumbledore didn't have an extra pair. His skin looked sallow and loose, as though he'd lost weight, and his wrinkles seemed more pronounced, as a result. His long hair and beard were like old twine that had been thrown in a dustbin and each breath was a painful rasp that echoed around the chamber and made Harry's stomach clench. He swallowed, wondering what they would all do if they lost Dumbledore, then shook himself and tried not to think about that. Which just meant that it kept creeping into his mind.

"What do you think you are doing?" McGonagall demanded, when she had recovered from her shock and found her voice.

Harry looked at her levelly. "I saw Winky this morning."

That's all he had to say; McGonagall drew her lips into a line and glared, not at Harry, but at Aberforth. The glaring made sense to him now; when he'd previously seen her and Snape looking askance at Dumbledore, he'd found it rather odd. Harry remembered that Professor McGonagall, along with other teachers, had been rather unwelcoming to Aberforth when he'd come to the castle to teach Charms in Professor Flitwick's place.

"Harry! Hermione!" Dumbledore rasped, a smile creasing his worn features. "Ah, and we get some Weasleys into the bargain. How nice! Come in, come in. I have been feeling under the weather, as you have surmised, but despite my dreadful appearance, I *am* on the mend. I've quite missed seeing students. You keep me feeling young, you know. Not that your company is anything to sneeze at, Minerva, and you too, Aberforth —"

Professor McGonagall appeared to be having a difficult time not exploding. "Albus, I must protest!" she said, her voice shaking. "No one is to know —"

"— but clearly they *do* know, Minerva", he answered quietly but firmly. "Cat's out of the bag, it seems", he added with a small smile,

making Professor McGonagall purse her lips in annoyance at the joking reference to her Animagus form.

Aberforth nodded at Ron. "I told Albus that you knew right away. I could tell from the look on your face. But why is Harry just finding out? Why didn't you tell him?"

Ron looked embarrassed. "I was going to. I just happened to tell Hermione first, and she told me — told me that she and Harry had been in the headmaster's office and heard Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore talking while he was sick in bed —"

"Well!" McGonagall countered indignantly. "Is there no such thing anymore as a Head Boy and Girl who know the meaning of *propriety*?"

"Minerva", Dumbledore said slowly, "clearly there *is*. Harry and Hermione did not tell anyone about that, except for Hermione telling Ron *after* he'd detected Aberforth."

Aberforth turned to Harry. "Albus was absent from the Great Hall so much that he finally convinced Minerva to contact me and ask for a small favor. I was only needed to impersonate him at meals and in the corridors. The staff have all known about me, of course. With only two exceptions, they don't know *why* Albus has been indisposed. The speculations have ranged from his being dead to his having infiltrated the Death Eaters from within. In some ways, both are somewhat close to the truth", he said somberly (especially for Aberforth), looking at his brother's pale, drawn face. "At any rate, that meant I didn't need to do any performing at staff meetings, which Minerva very ably presided over. We didn't want the students to panic about their headmaster being incapacitated. And we also didn't word to get to Voldemort, although he obviously was aware of what Albus was doing once he began in earnest."

Dumbledore looked at Professor McGonagall now. "Speaking of not panicking the students, Minerva", he said, his voice only shaking a little now, "you'd best be moving along. Soon the early-risers will be in the Great Hall for their breakfasts. I am feeling well enough to entertain some visitors. It will make for a refreshing change, and I know I can trust to their discretion", he added, giving each of the four of them a meaningful look.

Professor McGonagall's mouth twisted unpleasantly as she looked at Aberforth; she did not argue, however. "Of course, Albus." She nodded at Harry and the others and said, "*Good morning*", to them, ice in her voice.

After she'd gone, Dumbledore suddenly looked quite tired from the strain of the speaking he'd done so far, as though he'd put on a good show for McGonagall's sake. He closed his eyes, licking dry, cracked lips and letting out a raspy breath again. It didn't seem to Harry that he was getting stronger. Aberforth, looking so like the headmaster (in better days), took a small metal bowl with a damp cloth and began gently to bathe his older brother's brow. Dumbledore waved him away with a feeble gesture; Aberforth didn't fight him. Dumbledore looked so different from when he first met him, when he was eleven. Harry leaned forward, whispering, "What *have* you been doing?"

"Inconveniencing Voldemort. Best word for it. For a time, it seemed to be working. However, when we received the news from Sweden about the reservation, I decided that it wasn't enough, and I stopped. The strain was incredible, day after day, all my waking hours..."

"What? Harry breathed, still mystified.

The old man looked listlessly at him for a moment; with his left hand he tapped the skin covering the artery that ran down behind his ear and thence his neck. "Right here", he rasped, "is where I gave a scar to Tom Riddle when he was eighteen. Accident. But it's there, and I did it, and it links us." He stopped abruptly. Harry nodded, waiting for further explanation. *Dumbledore had given Riddle a scar.* He pointed to Harry's forehead. "Minerva wanted me to repair your scar, when we left you in Surrey. I told her that scars can have their *uses*, and I've been right, haven't I? Apart from any pain you've felt, of course —"

"I've been able to *see* him, see what he's up to, or where", Harry agreed. "You're right; that sometimes has been convenient", he said quietly.

"Wait —" Hermione cut in. "What happened when Riddle was eighteen? How did you accidentally scar him? Was it at school, during a dueling demonstration or something?"

Dumbledore's blue eyes lit on Harry. "Harry knows."

Harry frowned, dumbfounded. "I do?"

Dumbledore nodded. "You told me once that you read my chocolate frog card your first time on the Hogwarts Express, and later recalled Nicolas Flamel's name from that..."

Harry thought and thought. "Well, it said you like bowling and chamber music, and had discovered the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and

the part about Flamel and alchemy... oh, and that you'd defeated the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945..." He stopped and looked at his headmaster, starting to understand.

The old man looked levelly at him and nodded. "Tom Riddle was a follower of his, briefly, after he finished school. He was there when I defeated Grindelwald. I had gone to the Black Forest with my brother and the MacDermids. Unfortunately, Aberforth and I returned without the MacDermids..."

"Snape's grandparents", Harry whispered. Aberforth was the one nodding now.

"Stuart MacDermid was a good man", Aberforth said, "and Simone was a fine woman. Outstanding Aurors and human beings. Should have been able to see their kids grow up."

Harry was shocked. Ginny whispered, "*Stuart? Simone?*" and then looked meaningfully at Harry. *His twin brothers had been named after Snape's grandparents!* If he'd been told this in his other life, he'd forgotten. He didn't *think* he'd been told.

"Right", Aberforth explained. "Simone Prud'homme had gone to Beauxbatons. Her family came here fleeing the chaos on the continent caused by Grindelwald, after she finished school."

"But —" Ron couldn't contain himself; "*how did you defeat Grindelwald?* How'd you kill him? That's why Voldemort fears you, I'll bet. He saw you kill another Dark Lord."

Dumbledore looked at Ron kindly, but with a touch of pity in his eyes as well. "I didn't."

Harry frowned, confused. "You didn't? But the card says you did. Not to mention every book Hermione owns."

"No, Harry", Hermione said quickly, her eyes alight with an epiphany. "It says he *defeated* Grindelwald. Not killed — defeated. It's different, isn't it, Professor?"

Dumbledore smiled at her, looking more like his old self. "Ten points for Gryffindor, Miss Granger", he said weakly. She colored. "It is indeed different. You could say I — sent him away. To a place where magic does not work, a place of both despair and hope." He paused, then looked at each of them one at a time. "I sent him into limbo."

The four of them frowned in confusion. Aberforth did not look surprised. Finally, Ron dared to say, "Into *what?*"

Harry was worried; Dumbledore looked very weak; his brother handed him a glass of water, helping him sit up straighter so the glass could be tilted enough to let him sip. "Limbo", Aberforth said, while helping him. "Where some souls wait after death."

"Wait for what?" Ron said, frowning.

Hermione was looking rather impatient, her hands on her hips. "Speaking of waiting — wait a minute. You're telling me that heaven, hell and limbo are *real places*? They exist in a solid way, so that if you just had the proper directions, you could take a trip there?"

Ron guffawed. "Well, that puts a new spin on the expression, 'The road to hell...'"

Aberforth looked at them all quite calmly. "For some people it is very real. For others it is not. It's as real as you think it is." The four of them exchanged confused looks again.

"I'm not sure I fully understand it myself", Dumbledore said slowly. "In addition to Limbo, Valhalla exists, and Mount Olympus, and other worlds beyond this one populated by gods and demons with whom humans have had business over the millenia that we have been sentient, from the time when human-like beings first expected there to be *something* else after death. Which not everyone expects today, but a large number of people do. And that has only been for roughly ten to thirty thousand years or so, depending upon which archeologists and paleontologists you believe. A hobby that did not get onto my chocolate frog card is that I love to read about the latest archeological news. Fascinating. I found quite a lot of useful information for Nicolas that way, when we were doing our research, translating ancient runes found by archeologists who didn't know what to make of them. Oh, how I itched to tell them what those runes said! I dared not, of course." He sighed. "Nonetheless, I still harbor my little fantasy of presenting a paper to the Royal Archeology Society... In my youth, I went on not a few digs myself..."

He paused to cough, then took another sip of water before continuing. "You see", Dumbledore rasped, "the human consciousness does not cease with death. That is why I have always thought of death as the next 'great adventure'. You should also know, if you do not already, that *every* human being has the capacity to do magic — witches and wizards more so than Muggles, obviously, but in large numbers, Muggles can pool their power and do amazing things, for good or evil. The collective human imagination

has thus created a plethora of worlds beyond this one where our minds can go after death.

"Normally one can only go to those worlds after dying, and by holding a true belief in them. And much as we think we control this, we do not truly have a say over what we believe and what we don't believe. A small child may tell himself that he doesn't believe there are monsters under his bed or in the wardrobe, but when he becomes old enough to sleep without a nightlight, those beliefs may creep back into his brain against his will. And it is not just small children who find themselves believing things that their so-called 'rational' minds say they should not. Belief is a very tricky thing that way. You can neither force yourself to believe nor disbelieve something. It is like falling in love — you cannot force yourself to love someone else, nor to cease loving. Now, having solid, hard evidence of something is an entirely different matter — that is *knowledge*, and quite a different animal from belief. Once we have knowledge of something, such as, oh, the world being round, we cease being able to speak about whether we *believe* the earth is round or flat. It becomes a matter of empirical evidence, not belief." He looked shrewdly at Harry, his eyes looking more focused, and Harry remembered Dumbledore telling him that he was highly suggestible and therein lay much of his power, his magical ability. It was his capacity to *believe*. Harry hung on the headmaster's every word.

"There are also some spells that have been created — largely by shamans who have undergone journeys to the realm of the dead — that invoke specific realms. Which is to say, there is a spell that can invoke Valhalla and allow a wizard to visit the Norse gods. Another spell allows one to invoke Mt. Olympus and visit Zeus himself, if you dare. It is not necessarily *safe* to invoke these worlds and confront these deities, and it is not a prerequisite to believe in their existence if you cast the spell. It is not necessary, for instance, to subscribe to a belief in limbo to invoke it." He stopped and began coughing violently; his voice had been dwindling as he was speaking, and Harry went down on his knees by his bedside now, his heart in his throat, his mind saying one thing over and over: *Please don't leave us, please don't leave us...*

Ginny put her hand on Harry's shoulder and he put his hand over hers. When Dumbledore's cough had subsided again, Ginny said, "Do you know why Tom decided to follow Grindelwald?" Her voice seemed very small in the quiet room, and Harry remembered her talking about Riddle, including

telling him about going into the diary. He'd done that too, but he hadn't written in the diary for months and months, letting Riddle into his *head*. Even in his other life, Draco had largely carried that burden, leaving Harry to merely dabble at the diary writing. He remembered that in the Chamber, Tom had spoken of having to listen to Ginny ramble on about *him*, the Great Harry Potter. He'd been bored by listening to Ginny's 'silly little troubles'. He'd pretended to be sympathetic, understanding. That was clearly before she was so thoroughly in his thrall that he didn't worry anymore about offending her or scaring her. Of all of them, he thought, Tom Riddle as a young man was probably most real to Ginny and Dumbledore, even though Harry had encountered Riddle briefly in the Chamber and in the trees at Godric's Hollow.

"Grindelwald was virulently anti-Muggle. Tom responded to that message more than most here at Hogwarts, though he was hardly the only one", Dumbledore said, looking at Ginny. Then Harry realized that Dumbledore and Ginny were also the only people he knew who habitually called him plain old 'Tom'. "Soon after he finished his seventh year, Tom disappeared. The Muggle war was winding down; before the end of the term, we'd had VE-Day. The camps in Germany and Poland, among other places, were being liberated by Allied Forces. The history books have it wrong — I didn't confront him before the end of the war, but just after VJ-Day..."

"VE-Day? VJ-Day? What?" Ron said, frowning.

Aberforth smiled at him. "Victory over Europe and Victory over Japan. Middle of August. A little over a week had passed since the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Terrible, just terrible. And yet — the atrocities to which those bombs were responding..." He sighed. "Grindelwald gloated over that, you know. Thought it was wonderful, he did. The bombings. He thought maybe the Muggles would all kill each other off. Grindelwald still held onto his power, even though he'd taken great pleasure in fomenting discord during the war, and it was technically over", Aberforth said grimly. "He took advantage of the chaos, people pointing fingers at each other as Allied troops rolled across Germany and France and Poland, among other places. Accusations of being spies and resistance fighters turned around and became accusations of collaboration."

"But you obviously didn't care about that when you decided to go fight him, Professor!" Hermione said, tears in her voice as she gazed proudly at Dumbledore. He shook his head slowly.

"I never `decided to go fight Grindelwald'," Dumbledore said gently. "I wasn't planning to go to Germany at all, let alone fight Grindelwald. Yes, he had been attacking wizarding Britain in much the same way the Germans had been attacking Muggle Britain..."

"They had their Blitz, we had our Battle of Diagon Alley", Aberforth said, his mouth drawn very thin. "We also sent the children up north, as Muggles had sent their children away from London and the focus of the bombings."

His brother nodded. "But I was merely a teacher at Hogwarts, not an Auror, not a dark wizard catcher. That was Aberforth's job."

They looked at Aberforth, dumbstruck. Finally, Ron said, "*You* were an Auror?"

Aberforth chuckled. "Hard to believe, isn't it? Yes, in those days I was an Auror. It's not *too* hard to believe, is it? I was a sprightly ninety years old, after all. Still had hair *your* color", he said, nodding at Ron. Ron smiled back at him, looking a little abashed.

"I only meant —"

"— that you thought the great Albus Dumbledore was the dark wizard catcher. Well, he definitely became more famous. If there's something you should have learned from that chocolate frog card, it's that Albus likes a quiet life. Bowling. Chamber music. He spent *years* researching alchemy with Nicolas. I can't stand things like that. I like being outdoors, really *doing* things. I like action. Well, I liked it more at that age. I'm feeling a bit more settled now. But I still prefer the outdoors to being cooped-up inside."

Dumbledore looked at them all one by one. "I did not go to Germany to fight Grindelwald. I went to save a young man from himself." He motioned to Aberforth; the glass of water was produced again; after a good long drink, he continued. "I was worried about Tom for seven years. I feared what he might do if he found out about his heritage, how he might respond. He'd already learned of his mother's family. I knew this because he opened the Chamber of Secrets in his fifth year, and the legend about the Chamber said that only Slytherin's heir could accomplish this. The Marvolo family constantly reminded everyone that they were descended

from Slytherin, and Cathy Marvolo was no different. She was also a Parseltongue, as her son eventually would be. I had taught her myself, thirty years earlier.

"But there was no way to *prove* that he'd opened the Chamber; the evidence he presented before the board of governors and Professor Dippet, our headmaster, made it seem very plausible that Hagrid's pet had killed the girl, and Hagrid was the least sympathetic person you could imagine when he appeared before the board", Dumbledore continued. "Even at thirteen he was already quite — substantial. Not to mention nervous. His nerves were misinterpreted as a guilty conscience. I did not believe he was guilty for a minute, but I also had no evidence to the contrary that could be presented, only a very strong suspicion about Tom Riddle. I even tried something very dangerous and, well frankly, illegal, to get some evidence of what Tom had done, but it didn't work..."

Harry's brain lit up with the answer. "*That's* when you used the Time-Turner to go back two hours! You said it was all for nought!"

Dumbledore frowned. "What? When did I tell you —" he rasped. Then he raised his eyebrows and gazed shrewdly at him. "Ah, yes. I think I can guess how you know that —" He gave Harry a small wink, then sighed. "All I could do for Hagrid was arrange for him to be apprenticed to Ogg, the old gamekeeper, so that he could take over when Ogg was ready to retire. It wasn't easy to convince Dippet to let Hagrid remain within a stone's throw of Hogwarts, even though his wand was broken upon his expulsion, but since Hagrid was essentially an orphan — missing mother and dead father — he finally agreed. He was considered to be my responsibility. Not once have I regretted that in over fifty years.

"But it was not his heritage as the last heir of Slytherin that I feared Tom would learn; I feared his reaction to learning of his *Muggle* heritage. When a student is Muggle-born and receives a Hogwarts letter, we don't just let them figure out what to do. You know that, Hermione. We send a school representative to speak to the family. However, we had no way of knowing that Tom hadn't grown up with his mother, a witch who would have told Tom that he was a wizard. Just as we did not know the extent to which your aunt and uncle hid your heritage from you, Harry. So, when we did not receive an owl from Tom or his mother, I was sent to visit him, just as we sent Hagrid to you."

"Is that why I kept receiving so many letters?" Harry asked, frowning.

"The letters are another story; they are charmed so that they will continue to come until you open and read one, beginning to end, including the list of supplies. They will come to you wherever you are, addressed appropriately, of course."

Harry nodded. "Uncle Vernon thought someone was watching the house because the address kept changing." Dumbledore gave a small chuckle at that. "I did manage to open one, but I didn't read the whole thing. He snatched it away."

"Yes, we were starting to think that there was a problem. Arabella said that the village had become quite overrun with owls. The milkman was rather perplexed about 'that crazy old Dursley', as he'd had to deliver your milk and eggs through a bathroom window, if I recall correctly. Is that right? She asked that it be taken care of before anything was written up in the papers, especially as there might be some mention of your home, Harry."

"Why couldn't *she* have given me my letter and explained about Hogwarts? She certainly knew how my aunt and uncle felt about magic."

"You weren't to know that she was a witch, and neither were your aunt and uncle. And she certainly did *not* know how they felt about magic. As far as she could tell, they were just very discreet about your being a wizard. They thought she was a Muggle. They weren't going to discuss this with her, were they?" Harry nodded. "So. Back to Tom. I fetched him from the orphanage myself, explaining to him that he was a wizard and that his mother had been a witch. I told the director of the orphanage that Tom's mother had left him a legacy — a scholarship to her old school. We didn't discuss Tom's father."

"Later, I became aware that he was spending long hours in the school library researching the Hogwarts founders, especially Slytherin. I heard him say that Muggle-born students were unworthy to attend Hogwarts. He seemed to be parroting what he'd read in books about Slytherin — at first. As he grew older, his diatribes became more original. I feared his learning about his father more than ever, the Muggle who had repudiated his mother, leaving Tom to grow up in an orphanage. What I didn't know was that Tom knew about his father even before he opened the chamber. He had evidently done research elsewhere, in the Muggle world."

"When Albus learned, quite by chance, that a family of Muggles named Riddle had been mysteriously murdered, and that they were in the

pink of health, with no marks on them anywhere, he *knew* what Tom had done", Aberforth said quietly. "He didn't want to believe it, but all of the evidence pointed in that direction — if you knew where to look, as the Muggle authorities did not, of course."

"I also knew that he had to be brought to justice", Dumbledore said. "But not a cruel, impersonal justice; a justice tempered by a knowledge of what he had endured as an abandoned child, a son bearing the name of a father who did not want him. I felt Tom needed someone to come to him who knew him when he was a frightened eleven-year-old boy who had just learned that he was a wizard and who had been plucked out of a Muggle orphanage and brought to a world whose existence he had never even suspected."

He stopped for more water. Harry thought his cheeks started to show some spots of color, as though he were being nourished by telling the story. Harry didn't take his eyes off him. Ginny now knelt beside Harry, her head resting on his shoulder, and Hermione and Ron stood side by side at the foot of the bed, where McGonagall had been.

"So, I told Aberforth that I was convinced Tom had killed his father and grandparents —"

"— and I knew that I wouldn't be able to take him in peacefully without having Albus with me. I needed there to be someone he *knew*, someone he would listen to — hopefully. The first step was to find him, so Albus did a very simple thing: he wrote to him."

Dumbledore nodded. "I used a tracking spell of my own devising to follow Aberforth's owl to the Black Forest. We took two other Aurors — the MacDermids. When we first arrived, Stuart, Simone and Aberforth hid. Tom was a bit shocked to see me, but I convinced him to spend a few minutes listening to me." The headmaster heaved a great sigh. "He pretended to, that was all. I knew it wasn't going well. I wasn't reaching him. Finally, he said that he didn't need to listen to me because I was Muggle-born. Evidently, he'd researched every teacher at Hogwarts."

Ron gasped. "*You're Muggle-born?*"

Hermione separated from him, her face a dark scowl. "Ron! I'm surprised at you!" She turned to Dumbledore. "But — I'm surprised about you, too, Professor", she said, her voice shaking. "I think I just assumed that you came from an old magical family."

"So", Harry mused, "the one wizard Voldemort most fears is Muggle-born. And I knew you were Riddle's Transfiguration teacher, but it didn't occur to me that that made it unlikely that you were an Auror. I should have realized you'd usually be at Hogwarts. And I didn't know you were Muggle-born..."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, I am. I received my Hogwarts letter when my brother was only a year old, so unfortunately, I wasn't able to see him grow up. I was out of school myself when he received *his* letter. I didn't even know he was a wizard until after he'd gone to school. I no longer lived in Britain; even long-distance owls need some time to cover six-thousand miles..."

"At any rate, I tried to reason with Tom. I told him that I understood that he was upset about his father abandoning his mother for being a witch. I assumed, of course, that he had just found out. I did not know that he'd harbored this resentment for years. I also told him that when a wizard uses magic to kill willingly, something changes in him; he would never be happy until he came back home with me, to pay his debt to society... He argued, that even if that *were* to make him happy, the dementors in Azkaban would suck the happiness out of him. I couldn't argue with that, of course.

"He did not wish to talk any longer but said that his Master would be meeting him there soon; if I were still there, Grindelwald might think him a traitor, that it was a trap. Tom aimed his wand at me; I dodged the curse. I attempted to stun him, but he disappeared, Apparating to a point about ten yards behind me. Unfortunately, this allowed him to discover Aberforth and the MacDermids in their hiding places. He let out such a cry of betrayal — he said he *knew* I didn't want to just talk, that it *was* a trap — for him.

"They dueled with him; he dodged their curses expertly. A part of me felt rather proud of him, in a way; he was executing some impressive Transfiguration of the rocks and trees around them. I could see that it would be no easy feat, even with three Aurors, to capture the brightest student that Hogwarts had ever seen, and someone who had been learning dark magic at the knee of Grindelwald, even for a short time.

"The three of them kept on. He continued to hold them off. I tried to sever a tree limb near Tom, to distract him, but a spell from one of the

MacDermids' wands hit my spell in mid-air and it ricocheted, hitting Tom on the neck, scarring him..."

Dumbledore stopped, looking into space, as though seeing the young Tom Riddle, holding off three Aurors and his old teacher single-handedly. "He sank to his knees suddenly, holding his neck, and asked us to stop. He said he was turning himself in, he couldn't go on fighting. We believed him. I was somewhat disappointed; I had hoped Tom would turn himself willingly, rather than being coerced. He wanted to know what would happen to him. Albus explained some of it, but somehow it felt odd to me, like he was stalling, waiting, and I remembered that he'd said that Grindelwald was expected presently..."

Aberforth ran his hand over his face. "I should have turned in my Auror license then and there. I should have realized what we would be up against once Grindelwald arrived..."

"To say that Grindelwald was *not* happy was putting it lightly", Dumbledore said, his mouth twisting. "Now, at first, when he appeared, his back was to us. He could see only Tom, and he started speaking to him in German. I could understand, as I have an affinity for languages. Rather useful for research. It was something like, 'I hope you haven't botched things up again'. That was the gist. Tom had also been rather good at languages in school. Well, he'd been good at everything. That's why he'd been Head Boy." Harry swallowed and his fingers itched to tear off his Head Boy badge.

"Tom took Grindelwald's verbal abuse, surprising me, but then he said, 'My Lord — ' In German. '*Mein Herr*'. He nodded at me. I had my chance to flee, but I did not. I stood my ground; Grindelwald turned to find me, Aberforth and the MacDermids. To this day, I don't know why none of us attacked him when his back was turned." Suddenly, he set his jaw, a steely look in his eye that made him truly seem like the old Dumbledore; not the joking, cheerful Dumbledore, but the formidable wizard who had stormed the Defense Against the Dark Arts office with Snape and McGonagall after the Triwizard Tournament.

"No. I do know. I think it was a combination of feeling that it was inherently wrong to attack from behind — not sporting, or good form, or whatever you like; and — well, he was quite impressive. When he arrived and started to speak, he was — mesmerizing, even though we couldn't see

his face. Dark wizards don't acquire followers for no reason. They must have a certain chemistry, a charisma. Grindelwald had it. Tom wanted it."

Aberforth nodded, looking sadder than Harry had ever seen him. "How I wished afterward that I had just stunned them both..."

His brother patted his hand. "Now, Aberforth. Water under the bridge." He sat up a little straighter. "He seemed glad to see us for a moment. I think he thought we were new supporters. But Tom told him we were Aurors. I reckon he didn't think it worthwhile to split hairs and identify me as his old Transfiguration teacher. Grindelwald was angry with him, assuming that *he'd* brought us there, that he was guilty of treachery. Tom denied it. He was rather obsequious and told Grindelwald that he had pretended to surrender, which we'd stupidly believed. I doubt that he knew I understood every word."

Dumbledore snorted a little, but it turned into a cough. He leaned forward slightly and his brother patted his back gently. When he was leaning against the pillows again, he said softly, "Grindelwald laughed and laughed. Then he said, 'What do *they* matter when *I* can do *this*!' He put an engorgement charm on his wand, so that it was the size of a walking stick, like an old-fashioned wizard's staff. He struck the ground with it three times and cried out an incantation. He opened limbo."

His mouth was very thin. Aberforth closed his eyes for a moment, as though in pain. "It was — I can't describe it", Aberforth said slowly. "Like the earth being ripped in two. A fissure opened up in the ground with us on one side, Grindelwald and Tom Riddle on the other. We could feel something drawing us toward it, like a vortex, and Albus and I hung onto the nearest trees for dear life, to keep from being sucked into the chasm. It felt like — like it was *alive*, like it *wanted* us to go in. And I still remember how tempting it felt to just let go and allow it to happen... It required all of our strength of mind and body to avoid succumbing. Unfortunately, Stuart and Simone didn't manage to do the same. We watched in horror as they were pulled into the fissure. We had been too concerned about ourselves to notice whether they needed assistance. Tom Riddle clutched a tree for dear life, on the other side of the fissure, but Grindelwald was just standing before us, laughing, raising his staff in the air in triumph. Evidently he didn't need to hold onto anything, as we did, although whether it was because he had cast the spell or was just the most powerful among us I don't know..."

Dumbledore nodded. "I had just watched the MacDermids disappear, and I felt a rage as I never had before." Harry could hear that thread of rage in his voice now, making it taut and precise. "I thought very quickly about what to do. It was quite simple, really. A summoning charm. I pointed my wand at him and cried, *`Accio, Grindelwald!'* He *laughed* at me. He obviously thought it was the stupidest thing he'd ever seen. But it worked, and soon he was flying toward me, still laughing. Perhaps he thought it was daft because he knew what he would do to me when he reached me.

"Then, when he was over the chasm, I raised my wand, pointing it straight up, aborting the spell. Although I know he couldn't have done, he seemed to float in space for some time before the vortex took him... As he fell he screamed horrible things in German..."

Harry, Hermione and Ginny all gasped. Ron punched the air and cried, "Yes! Take that, Grindelwald!" Then he looked around, reddening. Aberforth gave him a small smile, and Harry thought he saw just a slight twinkle appear in Dumbledore's blue eyes.

"That is how many people felt when they heard about Grindelwald being defeated. Tom, however, released the tree to which he was clinging, crying, *`No!'* and reaching out for his Master. He was immediately drawn toward the chasm and I quickly engorged my own wand and struck the ground with it, hoping that the incantation I'd chosen would close the fissure. I had not come to the Black Forest so that a young man would be lost — quite the opposite. A great wind swept down through the trees and seemed to knit the sundered earth together, and then the ground was whole once more, as if it always had been."

Harry gawped at the headmaster, and Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, Harry. I know. Think of all the lives that have been lost because I did not allow Tom Riddle to be drawn into limbo with Grindelwald, where he would never have troubled the world again. Do you think a day has passed, in the last fifty-odd years, when I haven't thought of that?"

Harry bit his lip, and clenched his fists, the nails digging into his palms. "It's — it's not that, sir. When I think of what's happened since Voldemort came back — which he did with Wormtail's help — I think of how I made it possible for Wormtail to get away, to return to Voldemort —"

"Now, Harry, you could no more have killed Peter Pettigrew in cold blood at the age of thirteen than I could have watched that poor, misguided boy — as I thought he was — plunge into the chasm. Although I told myself that I hadn't killed Grindelwald — technically, I hadn't — and I wasn't a murderer, I felt very much like one. Perhaps I wanted to convince myself that I wasn't a murderer by saving young Tom from the same fate..."

He sighed and drank more water. Aberforth said, "Riddle was enraged. He screamed, 'You ruined everything!' He clawed at the earth, trying to open it up again. 'I was going to kill him myself, eventually!' he said. We were shocked. Were we mistaken? Was Riddle really with Grindelwald to bring him down? But he hadn't finished. He said that he'd been planning to learn everything he could from Grindelwald, and *then* get rid of him. Albus and I laughed. We couldn't help it. This young whelp thought he could bring down Grindelwald!"

Albus shook his head. "It's possible that Grindelwald would still be wreaking havoc if he hadn't opened up limbo himself, and if I hadn't surprised him with the utter simplicity of my summoning charm. It would never have occurred to *me* to open limbo. My rage over Stuart and Simone probably helped focus my power. It is also possible that Grindelwald *couldn't* have been killed. There were rumors that Grindelwald had somehow made himself immortal — or nearly so. Many stories were floating about, telling of wizards who had attacked him in ways that should have killed him but did not."

Harry nodded. "That's what Riddle wanted..."

"Yes, Harry. Tom wanted the ultimate power: immortality. But I knew how overrated it was. I was the one, after all, who had done numerous experiments to find an Elixir that did not make Nicolas and his wife ill after drinking it. We even tried making a new stone. We thought — if we created a new stone, altering the process slightly, the resulting potion might not be so debilitating. Yes, they had already lived for hundreds of years when I came along. But it wasn't a peaceful life. However, he tempted me with it. I thought long and hard over whether I wanted to partake, finally refusing. I left it to him and his wife. I was quite young at the time and rather thought I *was* immortal without the benefit of any potion. That is the gift of youth", he said, smiling at the four students hanging on his every word.

"I shook my head at Tom and said to him, 'You wouldn't be able to do that, Tom. I know you let that creature of Slytherin's — whatever it was — kill Myrtle, and that you killed your father and grandparents, but I still believe that, deep down, you want to atone for those deaths. You're a good boy, Tom'. I repeated that, walking toward him; he looked like I had stabbed him. His eyes were wide with pain; he clutched his neck and began rolling on the ground. I was shocked and I stopped speaking. Tom was just getting his breath back when I experimented; I said again, 'You're a good boy, Tom', and I made sure that I really was thinking that, that I wasn't just mouthing the words. 'You're a good boy and we want to help you. We care what happens to you. You're a good boy, Tom'."

"'Stop saying that, old man!' Riddle screamed", Aberforth told them, his voice shrill when imitating Tom Riddle. "Oh, he looked mad with pain. Albus' good thoughts were doing that. He was enraged, down on his knees with a hand pressed to the scar."

Dumbledore looked into space. "I remember everything he said after that. It haunted me, after he rose to power almost thirty years ago, and after you and Ginny emerged from the Chamber alive, with Riddle's destroyed diary", he said, turning his head to Ginny and Harry. "'He said, 'No. I am not good. I am everything that good abhors. And more. Much more. You will find out some day, old man. You think you know so much, that I killed that Mudblood, Myrtle? Yes, I did. With help from the great Salazar Slytherin'. He gave us a quite evil-looking smile and said, 'Myrtle won't be the last to die at Hogwarts. I left a bit of myself at the school, just waiting for the right accomplice. The Chamber of Secrets shall be opened again, and the school Slytherin helped create will be purged of Muggle-born scum like you once and for all!'"

"*The diary*", Hermione breathed, clutching at Ron. Harry looked at Ginny's face, which was very white, under her freckles. He put his arm around her shaking shoulders.

"*Not you*", he whispered to her. "Lucius Malfoy. He must have found the diary in Slytherin House, wrote in it, found out what it was, then saved it for a rainy day."

Dumbledore nodded. "You're probably right, Harry. Lucius Malfoy was Head Boy in his time, as Tom Riddle had been. He finished school not long after Voldemort first rose to power; I often heard him speak admiringly of

Voldemort. He didn't know I was about, of course, when he said these things."

Harry looked at him shrewdly. "Were you perhaps — invisible? In my other life, I saw you suddenly *become* visible once... How do you do that?" he asked softly.

The edge of Dumbledore's mouth curled up as he said, "Now that would be telling."

Ron looked impatient. "Oh, come on! How did Riddle get away? Why couldn't you have just sent another owl, to track him down again?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Tom wasn't done. He said, 'You found me once because of my name, my filthy Muggle father's name. That is no longer *my* name; I shall have a new name, a new identity, and although every witch and wizard shall know it well someday and tremble to say it, until that time, you shall not be able to find me! Then shall all the wizarding world long for the halcyon days of Lord Grindelwald!' Well, after this rather grandiose speech, he Disapparated. He might have tried to kill us again, I reckon, but then we would not be able tell the world of the next great dark wizard..."

"I was the one who told the Ministry about Grindelwald", Aberforth said. "Albus didn't want credit. 'I didn't go to the Black Forest alone, Aberforth', he kept saying to me." Aberforth grinned. "I wouldn't hear it. My brother had defeated Grindelwald and I wanted the world to know", he said, looking at Dumbledore with affection and pride. "He received the Order of Merlin, first class, of course, and was immediately invited to join the International Confederation of Wizards with the rank of Grand Sorcerer. In the end, we didn't say anything about Riddle. It seemed — out of place." He nodded sadly at his brother. "It was what he wanted, and I understood. People were celebrating the end of Grindelwald. It wasn't the time to induce panic about a new dark lord, when Riddle might never acquire the sort of power Grindelwald had."

Harry looked at Dumbledore. "So how have you been fighting him? I don't understand."

"Your scar", Dumbledore said, "hurts you when Voldemort is feeling particularly evil. I think that is in part because such things are anathema to you — foreign. When I was thinking good thoughts at Tom, he felt pain in the scar I gave him. *Those* thoughts were alien to *him*. He had been instrumental in a young girl being killed when he was only sixteen. He'd

killed his father and grandparents. He'd done whatever Grindelwald had asked since he'd started trailing around after him. He was the heir of Slytherin. Tom didn't think he was good and no one else was supposed to, either.

"We tried sending another owl, but he kept his promise of our not being able to find him. The owl came back. I suspect that he made himself owl-proof as 'Tom Riddle', so that he could not receive post under that name, and we didn't know yet what new name he had adopted, so we could no longer rely on that method to locate him."

"So", Hermione said softly, "you've been causing Voldemort pain by — what? Thinking nice things at him? God. What good opinions could *anyone* have about him by now? Trying to do that would be enough to send me to *my* sickbed, too."

They all laughed, but Harry, Ginny and Ron quickly attempted to stifle their laughter, looking guilty. Dumbledore shooed their guilt away with his hand. "Laugh! If we've reached the point where we're afraid of the impropriety of laughing, then he has won." He looked at Harry. "Just as a boggart can't stand laughter, so Voldemort cannot stand someone thinking well of him, having *good* opinions about him. Fearing him, yes. Admiring him, again, yes. But *not* thinking he is good."

Ron frowned. "Yeah, but I think Hermione had a point. How do you think good things about Voldemort? Wouldn't you need some kind of — I don't know —" Ron said, waving his arms helplessly, "— memory charm to forget all of the terrible things he's done?"

Dumbledore smiled at him. "Ah, there's that incisive ability to stumble on the solution when being flippant. That is *precisely* what we did. I had Professor McGonagall put memory charms on me. They were actually more like recall charms. I was sent back in my thinking to a time when Tom was a new Hogwarts student. I was able to vividly recall the wonder in his face during his first Transfiguration lesson... It was a time Tom truly was a good boy, an innocent lad. So, I was able to concentrate on sending truly good thoughts about him *to* him and, as a result, disrupt his other thought processes. Between the memory charms and making a concerted effort to think good thoughts at Voldemort — or rather, Tom — much of the day, I was under quite a strain and quickly took to my bed. It's not as easy as it sounds; it took quite a lot out of me."

Ginny gave him a small smile. "You were killing him with kindness", she said quietly.

Dumbledore smiled back at her; Harry saw another small twinkle. "Not really killing. Unless you consider that I called him *Tom* in my thoughts. In a way, I was trying to kill Voldemort, but I also wanted to resurrect the boy, Tom Riddle. Because of Minerva's charms, I was able to forget the man and consistently see in my mind's eye the *boy*." Then he looked rather sad. "I decided to stop what I was doing after the news from Sweden", he said quietly. "I decided that I needed to get my strength back."

"But the Death Eaters at Gringotts surrendered!" Ron said brightly.

Dumbledore nodded somberly. "Yes, good news. I sent Remus a note of congratulations and said we must have a tea party, recipients of the Order of Merlin only..."

Aberforth brightened. "Good! I can come."

Ron looked unflatteringly surprised. "You!"

Aberforth bristled slightly. "Yes. When we returned from Germany, Albus refused to accept the Order of Merlin unless I received it as well. I only received third class, but I still have my O.M. badge at home somewhere."

"And it's been about two months since the broom race, Professor", Harry said excitedly. "Voldemort hasn't done anything since then, so it doesn't seem *too* dreadful that you're not doing it anymore. There haven't been any attacks, only the Gringotts surrender. I haven't felt so much as a twinge from my scar."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes. That is what concerns me..." He began coughing again and accepted the glass of water from Aberforth once more.

"I think that's enough for your headmaster for the time being. He is still recovering. You should go down to breakfast", Aberforth told them.

Harry put his hand out to Dumbledore, who took it. "Thank you for what you've done. I can tell it hasn't been easy, and I'm glad you're going to be all right", he said earnestly.

"Eventually," Dumbledore said, waving away Harry's concern. "If only I had been able to do more..."

They returned to Gryffindor Tower so they could shower and change their clothes; Harry finished first, and as he waited for the others to return to the common room, he fingered his scar tentatively. *Voldemort knew he could get to me through the curse scar because he has one*, he thought. He

traced the lightning bolt, thinking about poor Dumbledore having to think nice things about Voldemort and about his defeating Grindelwald. *It's even possible that Grindelwald couldn't have been killed. There were rumors that he'd somehow made himself immortal — or very nearly so.* Had Voldemort strengthened himself again, so that he couldn't actually be killed? Harry wondered. If not — how far along the path to immortality was he?

Harry was glad when the others returned and they left. He could think about that afternoon's Dueling Club meeting, and Quidditch and what he wanted for breakfast.

However, he had to think about something else entirely when Ruth and Tony looked up at the four of them in surprise. "Oh, there you all are", Ruth said, raising her eyebrows. "We waited and waited, but we finally decided to go running without you." Ginny was next to Harry and Ruth was on her other side; Harry heard her say, leaning close to Ginny, *"And you'll have to tell me later why you weren't in your bed this morning."*

Harry saw that Ron, across the table, had heard this comment; his nostrils were flaring and he was glaring at Harry, his jaw clenched. "Could I speak to you for a minute, Harry?"

Harry put down the kipper he'd been about to bite. "Erm, sure", he said, trying not to sound panicked. He followed Ron to the entrance hall; Ron opened the castle's front door and they stepped outside. Harry shivered in the cold. "Before you say anything Ron —"

"No, I don't think you shagged my sister, because I didn't smell that on either one of you, but I'll just bet you were *thinking* about it —"

Harry threw up his hands. "Well, of *course* I was thinking about it. For pete's sake, Ron. I'm a human being. But Ginny hasn't taken the potion yet. Do you think I want to go through worrying about that all over again?" As soon as he said it, he wanted to bite his tongue. Ron's eyes looked like they were going to leap out of his head.

"*What* did you say?"

Harry cleared his throat. "I mean — what I meant to say was — oh, bollocks. Just listen to what I have to say and promise you won't lose your temper. At least until I'm done."

Ron, arms crossed, leaned against the closed door, as though cutting off Harry's escape. He didn't appear to feel cold at all. Harry hugged his arms to his chest and spoke quickly, explaining about the night in the

Quidditch changing rooms. "That's why you came out of hiding — you thought Ginny was pregnant. That led to Binns finding out you were alive —"

Ron seemed to be having a hard time restraining himself. "Why didn't you tell me this?"

"Why? I was showing you and Hermione my Pensieve. Hermione was still my girlfriend when I was with Ginny. Technically. And you're Ginny's brother. I was supposed to tell the pair of you I'd slept with her, even in another life? And I thought *Ginny* was upset —"

Ron's eyebrows flew up. "Ginny knows? And to get back to our original topic, would you happen to know why she wasn't in her bed this morning?"

"She was downstairs with me. We fell asleep in front of the fire. It was perfectly innocent." *It almost wasn't*, he thought, but technically, he was telling the truth.

Ron looked shrewdly at him. "And Ginny wasn't upset when she found out about this?"

"Well, of *course* she was upset. Why do you think we spent a couple of weeks apart? You think that was just for the sake of appearances? I was waiting for her to forgive me."

"For shagging her? Or for not telling her?" Ron ground out, his jaw clenched again.

Harry grimaced. "For telling Draco Malfoy about it."

Ron grabbed Harry by the shoulders and put him up against the castle door. "*What?*"

"Please put me down", Harry squeaked; his feet were a good six inches off the ground. Ron relented and Harry slumped against the door. He cleared his throat. "Malfoy let it 'accidentally' slip to her after he saw us in Hagrid's cabin, that time we were supposed to be having tea with him and you and Hermione left to duel with Tony and Ruth."

Ron's mouth hung open. "And where was Hagrid?" he finally managed to say.

"He had to take some newts to the castle, for Snape. Evidently, Hermione's part was getting you out of there, and Maggie took care of Hagrid."

Ron paced, running his fingers through his hair. "Oh, lovely. Hermione and Maggie. My girlfriend and my sister are trying to help my *other* sister

lose her virginity. Smashing."

"No, Ron!" Harry said quickly. "It was just to let us have some time alone. That's all —"

Ron shook his head, evidently thinking of something else now. "How could you tell Malfoy, Harry?" he said softly. Harry looked about for a hole to fall into.

"I know. It was stupid. But I have to ask, Ron — how are you going to respond when —"

Ron ran his hand through his hair. "I'll try to restrain myself, Harry. Being overprotective is a tough habit to break. You know what it's like — you had a sister. If Ginny's happy, I reckon it'll be easier. But I can't vouch for our other brothers. A fair warning. And you'd bloody well better not hurt her."

Harry gave his best friend a lop-sided smile. "That's the last thing in the world I want, Ron, believe me. I also have to admit — I'm a little superstitious about this. In my other life, we had no sooner spent the night together when she had to go into hiding. I don't know — maybe I'm afraid that if we do the same thing in this life, we're just asking for trouble. Maybe we're jinxed. I'm probably being stupid, but — when I think about that, it actually hasn't been that hard to control myself. I don't want anything to happen to Ginny."

Ron put his hand on Harry's shoulder now. "If you want to think you shouldn't sleep with my sister because you're jinxed, that's fine with me, Harry", he said solemnly.

Harry batted his hand away, laughing. "Oh, yeah, as though you'd have a problem with my thinking that. I'm not saying that I really believe that. I just — I think about it sometimes in a sort of `what-if' way. I know it's stupid —"

"No, no, you should absolutely consider that it might be true, Harry", Ron said, putting his arm around Harry's shoulders and opening the heavy front door like it weighed nothing.

Harry laughed again. "Are we all right?"

He was relieved to see Ron smiling at him now. "Yes, Harry. We're fine."

Hermione and Ginny emerged from the Great Hall; Ginny was carrying some toast in a napkin, which she handed to Harry. "Fine about what?" she

asked, looking back and forth between Harry and Ron. Harry put his arm around her and kissed her on the cheek.

"Ron's decided to try to turn over a new leaf when it comes to his attitude about us."

"He has, has he?" she said, looking amused. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Ron huffed at her and made it very easy for Harry to picture him at about the age of five. "I can be as mature about this as anyone", he said, his expression verging on a pout.

Hermione was trying not to laugh. "Come on, Mr. Maturity. We were going to write those History of Magic essays before lunch." She pulled him up the marble stairs.

He followed her, saying, "Oh, and I have a bone to pick with you, *Miss Granger* —"

Harry took a bite of toast and followed while Ron give Hermione a piece of his mind about conspiring to get him out of Hagrid's cabin. Harry's arm was still around Ginny, who smiled sunnily at him, making him feel warm inside. However, when they reached the landing, his senses were all on alert, as though someone was watching. He looked down; glaring up at him from the foot of the stairs were the blazing grey eyes of Draco Malfoy.

* * *

Ron was holding his middle and panting for breath, sitting on the cold stone floor in the Great Hall. "How did you dodge that Passus Curse?" he asked Harry. "I was certain I was going to hit you."

"Oh, right. That reminds me." He directed his words to his left upper arm now. "Thanks for the warning about Ron's curse, Sandy."

"You know that I do not —"

"— have any control over what you See. I know, I know. Thanks anyway."

Ron looked particularly disgruntled while the hissing conversation was occurring. "Cheat", he said softly.

"It's no more cheating to be a Parselmouth than to be a werewolf", Harry asserted.

"Took your time removing that tickling charm, though, didn't you Harry?" Harry grimaced and put out his hand to help Ron rise; the hand was ignored and he stood unassisted.

"Yeah, well, you were being pretty hard on Hermione when you were dueling her. She already apologized for not telling you about Hagrid's hut. Keeping the Inverso Charm on her as long as you did wasn't very nice. She nearly spewed her lunch."

"Well, what's she doing trying to give the two of you opportunities to be alone, anyway? You're her ex-boyfriend. Surely that's not *normal*..." he started to say, when his face suddenly lit up, as though she'd had a revelation. "I know why", he breathed, looking at her with narrowed eyes. "Guilt", he informed Harry.

"Guilt", Harry said with almost no inflection; he was not convinced.

"Yeah. Even though she was under the influence of that potion for months, she *knew* how Ginny felt about you. She went after the bloke her friend fancied. Guilt. Oh, come on, Harry. You've said as much to me about what you did. You knew how I felt about Hermione, and —"

"— and after I tried to get you to do something about it and you stubbornly refused —"

"Oh, we are *not* having *that* conversation again", Ron said, rolling his eyes, even though he'd started it. He brushed himself off, looking at Hermione, who was very pointedly *not* looking at him but conversing with Ginny and Maggie. Ron and Ginny's sister had come to watch the dueling. Harry noticed Draco Malfoy on the other side of the room, where he'd been dueling with Tony Perugia. Harry didn't know whether he was ignoring him, Ron and Hermione (and Ginny) or just pretending to. The other Dueling Club members were starting to disperse.

"I couldn't believe what you were all doing to each other!" Harry heard Maggie saying to the girls. "I've chewed my nails down to the quick just watching!"

Ginny and Hermione smiled at her, and it seemed to Harry that Hermione gave Ron a very cold glance out of the corner of her eye.

"Well", Hermione said, never looking directly at Ron, "we're supposed to be pulling our punches, of course. But some people can get carried away..."

As the captain, Harry used his wand to help Snape move the tables back into position in the Great Hall, remaining behind when the others left. He noticed that Ron and Hermione were not touching, although they walked next to each other up the marble stairs. Ginny walked up the stairs behind them, talking animatedly with her sister. She gave Harry a smile

before disappearing from sight. Draco Malfoy had already removed himself from the Great Hall and was nowhere to be seen.

Before Snape strode out of the hall, Harry stopped him. "Sir; can I ask you something?"

Snape turned to look at Harry with one brow raised inquisitively. "Yes, Harry?"

He'd almost expected Snape to call him 'Potter' again, just as Draco Malfoy had returned to calling him that. "Well, I was wondering — you're not cross with Maggie, are you? Because of Hagrid and the newts?"

Snape turned to fully face him now, his arms crossed on his chest. "Would you care to begin making sense at some point, *Mr. Potter*?"

There went the 'Harry'. "I meant — when Hagrid brought the newts for the potion —"

Snape nodded now, understanding. "Yes; I wondered when Miss Dougherty developed an interest in baking. She was speaking to Hagrid about it for quite some time. Why should I be cross with her for that?"

"Erm, no reason", Harry mumbled, starting to climb the marble stairs himself.

"Would this have anything to do with the fact that Draco Malfoy discovered you and Miss Weasley in Hagrid's otherwise empty hut that afternoon?" Snape said slowly and evenly, his face an impassive mask.

Harry froze. He looked down where Snape stood in the curve of the stairs, so that he didn't need to turn to see him. "I didn't know that was general knowledge among the staff. Or anyone else." His voice shook.

"It is not. Professor Black told me. He evidently had no one else to speak to about this and decided to waste almost an hour of my time which could have been spent marking tedious essays by the third year Hufflepuffs."

It wasn't easy to see, but Harry could detect the corner of his mouth starting to curve upward. *He's enjoying this*, Harry realized. "I'm sorry he took up so much of your time", he responded very formally.

"I am not a bit sorry that you were caught, however. It is all out in the open now. That was going to happen in the long run." He took in the look of surprise on Harry's face; then Harry realized that Maggie had probably told Snape about him and Ginny. "I have been telling Professor Black that you should tell Mr. Malfoy about —"

"Me too!" Harry interrupted, grinning. Snape looked at him, tight-lipped, but said nothing. "I mean, I *tried* to tell Sirius that it should come from me. I know he thought it was putting too many people at risk, including Draco, but now Draco hates me again..."

Snape sniffed. "Are you surprised? He and Miss Weasley were together for some time, and he glances in Hagrid's window and sees the pair of you — well, I can imagine what he saw."

"No, you can't!" Harry burst out defensively. "I mean — we were just sitting and talking!"

"Just —?" There went those eyebrows again.

"And, erm, well, while we were talking, she was sitting on my lap", he said softly. Okay, he thought; we weren't *just* talking...

The corner of Snape's mouth was curling up slightly again. "Which doesn't look the *least* bit incriminating", he said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Harry grimaced and sat on the steps. To his surprise, Snape climbed the steps and sat next to him, looking straight ahead, his forearms propped on his bony knees. "I was only in Slytherin House with Lucius Malfoy for a year", he said suddenly, "as he was Head Boy when I started school. But you are aware that he recruited me for the Dark Lord. I believe I can shed some light for you on the Malfoy psyche. If you are willing to listen to the voice of experience."

Harry looked down at his hands, then up at the man he'd known for so long as his stepfather. "Erm, yeah, I'd like that."

"First — if there is something you don't want a Malfoy to learn about but think it likely or at least possible he will eventually, tell him yourself first. That way you can be in complete control of the situation." Harry nodded. That made sense. "Second, if that approach fails, either because he learns about it from another source or does not take the news well, do not get defensive. Apologize profusely. Make him think that you *knew* he knew and wanted to avoid forcing him to dwell on it. If you can, make it sound like you were under the impression that it was his idea to do this. Even better is to find a way to convince him that it *was* his idea."

Harry frowned. "I'm not sure how I would have done that..."

"How did Mr. Malfoy react when he learned about you and Miss Weasley?"

"Well, at first he stalked off. I went after him. Then he hit me. I probably should have taken house points —" he started to say, but remembered that those points would come from Slytherin.

To his surprise, Snape was all-out grinning now. Harry started to laugh in spite of himself; it was so nice to see Snape smile again, even if it was at his expense. "What's so funny?"

"That's just what Lucius Malfoy did to me."

Harry's jaw dropped. "What? You mean you — and Mrs. Malfoy —"

"Oh, she wasn't Mrs. Malfoy yet. What do you take me for? They were engaged, however..."

"Engaged?" Harry choked. Snape nodded.

"I didn't say I never made a mistake when it came to a Malfoy. I learned what *not* to do the hard way. I suspected when he recruited me that he knew all along, even though he never said a word about her. Later, when he actually retaliated, I learned that she thought it was all rather funny and had told him herself. I think he also knew she instigated everything, including taking advantage of the fact that I'd had too much to drink. Which still didn't prevent him retaliating against me. But he waited — he saved it up. A Malfoy can do one of the longest slow burns I know of. Remember that."

"*Malfoys; specializing in grudges since always*", Harry said, his mouth twisting.

Snape shook his head, ignoring this. "Why do you think there is so much bad blood between the Malfoys and Weasleys? They're *still* not over it..."

"Over what?"

"Your best friend never told you? Nor Miss Weasley?" Harry shook his head. Snape breathed deeply through his large nose before saying, "Arthur Weasley killed Lucius Malfoy's father."

Harry's eyes went wide. "That can't be true! Mr. Weasley would never —"

"Oh, it was all in the performance of his job duties. A raid. And in self-defense, on top of that. Ministry employees have seldom ever been charged with murder or assault, on or off the job. There have been abuses of that, of course, but no one was going to charge Arthur Weasley with murder."

"What about Sam Bell? Katie Bell's dad? Do you remember? He went to prison for killing his wife to protect Katie. *He* was a Ministry employee. An Auror."

Snape nodded. "I remember. He probably could have gone free, if he really wanted. He *chose* to go to prison. He confessed. Gave up ten years of his life, and his daughter's life, for nothing", he spat, as though angry about this. Harry remembered his face when he'd been in his Pensieve, seeing the family he might have had.

Harry also remembered Sam's face when he'd first told Harry about why he'd gone to prison. "It wasn't for nothing", Harry said softly. "He felt he had to do it."

They sat in silence then, but Harry didn't mind; it felt right to be beside the Potions Master, each staring ahead into space, neither one of them making any comment. He and his dad hadn't felt the need to talk constantly; companionable silence was a good thing, too.

Suddenly, the Sunday afternoon silence of the entrance hall was broken by the sound of footsteps pattering down the upper flights of stairs. Harry looked up, seeing Sirius drawing closer, and he remembered that they were going to the Hogsmeade station to meet Mr. Spinnet's lawyer, who was coming to the castle to speak to Alicia before the trial.

When he'd reached the top of the flight on which they were sitting, Harry stood, and Snape somewhat reluctantly followed suit. Sirius looked out of breath. "So, ready Harry? The carriage should be in front by now. Cecilia's train arrives in about a half hour."

Snape nodded at him. "Professor Black", he said very formally.

Sirius nodded back. "Professor Snape. I didn't expect to see you here. Isn't the Dueling Club meeting over?"

"Yes. However, Harry and I were discussing what an insufferable idiot you were to forbid him to tell Mr. Malfoy about him and Miss Weasley."

"No!" Harry said hastily. "I mean — yeah we were discussing that. No one said the word 'idiot'!" he added quickly.

Sirius drew his lips into a line. "It's rather a moot point now, isn't it? He knows. The damage is done."

"But it is worse than it had to be", Snape said quietly, in that dangerous voice Harry had feared since his first year. "Some brutal honesty would have been painful for Mr. Malfoy, but better in the long run for his now-defunct friendship with Harry. I have been charged with protecting him

since he was a first year — no mean feat, when he finds new and ever-more disturbing ways to risk his life every year — and now you come sweeping in here, every bit as arrogant as his father, convinced you know best! James Potter got himself and Lily killed and almost got his son killed when he was a baby. Are you trying to finish the job now?"

"Hey!" Harry cried. He looked with dismay at Snape. "No one talks about my father like that! And — and I know that Sirius meant well..." he said softly, looking at his godfather sheepishly. "And — I appreciate that you've protected me more than once. I wouldn't have survived my first Quidditch match if it weren't for you. Well, and Her —" He stopped himself in time, before he revealed that Hermione had set Snape's robes on fire. "Anyway, thank you both for — everything. But we *should* probably get to the station now", he finished lamely, not sure how to get out of the conversation without alienating one or the other of them — or both.

As he and Sirius were leaving the entrance hall, he looked behind him to see Severus Snape sweeping toward the stairs to the dungeons without looking back. It had been nice to talk to him again, and surprising that he had been in agreement with Harry about telling Draco. Perhaps that was why, he reflected on the way to the station, Sirius had sounded so impatient and unbending every time Harry had brought it up; Snape had been arguing the same thing at him repeatedly, and he was sick of hearing it. Or perhaps he thought Harry and Snape had conspired to wear him down.

While they moved closer to the village, he watched Sirius and thought of Snape, and hoped that someday he'd be able to really be friends with them both without having to worry about that being a problem for either one of them.

* * *

"Now, dear, do you think you're ready for the trial?"

Alicia looked wide-eyed at the barrister Sirius had hired to represent her father. "Hardly."

Cecilia Oberholtzer sighed and put down her tea. "I know, it's difficult to see your father in a situation like this, especially when you know he's innocent —"

"I just — I still don't know what I'm going to say when I testify."

Harry sat back, sipping his tea, watching them, sitting next to each other on the couch, with great interest. After meeting Cecilia Oberholtzer

at the station (she felt out of practice when it came to Apparition), they brought her to Sirius' rooms at the castle. Harry was going to leave again, but Cecilia insisted he stay. Oddly, she looked like Alicia probably would in twenty years. She was very smooth and elegant, her blonde hair cut short, her makeup understated and unobtrusive. She looked more than a little odd at Hogwarts, in her smart suit and her loud, clicking heels on the stone floors. Several students had done double-takes upon seeing her striding through the corridors. But Harry knew she'd gone to Hogwarts like any British witch, that she'd been in Gryffindor with his mother and father. She'd smiled upon entering the castle, looking around fondly before Sirius steered her up the stairs, a hand on her elbow. Sirius sat opposite Harry now, in an identical chair, also watching Cecilia and Alicia with interest.

"I understand, Alicia. I am very concerned that nothing you say is perjury. It's a fine line to walk. You need to be as truthful as possible about everything that occurred — but you also cannot, at any time, mention magic, witches, wizards, potions — in other words, anything that would violate the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy."

Alicia snorted and picked up a biscuit, biting it viciously. "Good luck to me", she said bitterly. "I'll either end up in Muggle prison for lying under oath or I'll be called before a wizarding tribunal because of the sacred ICWS. Damned if I do, damned if I don't."

Cecilia shook her head. "Plus, if you mention magic at all, you also run the risk of completely ruining your credibility. Which will appear in the papers. And which won't help your father's case."

Sirius sighed and leaned forward, pouring himself another cup of tea. "What's your strategy?" he asked.

Cecilia ticked points off on her fingers. "First — as Mr. Spinnet was sleeping in his office during the shootings, anyone could have pressed the gun into his hand afterward. I'm fairly certain that's *not* what happened — the gunman probably used a potion to impersonate Mr. Spinnet, and that's why his fingerprints were on the gun — but it's how it *could* have happened, and doesn't involve mentioning magic or potions. *They* didn't want the man who tested Mr. Spinnet's hand for gunpowder residue to testify. No surprise there, as he found none. We, however, have compelled him to testify; he has no choice. This is good!" she said to Alicia, seeing her stricken, uncertain look. "A hostile witness giving evidence that damages the crown's case is very good. If he seemed anxious to get your

dad off, he wouldn't be as believable. He'll be admitting this very reluctantly."

She turned back to Sirius. "So — his fingerprints on the weapon, but no gunpowder residue on the hand. No soap residue, either, indicating he'd done a quick wash. In fact, when he was tested, his hand was quite dirty. It will bolster our contention that he didn't fire the weapon, that it was pressed into his hand after the fact, to frame him."

Harry tried to smile reassuringly at Alicia; she smiled feebly back. "Second", Cecilia went on, "the security film is blurry and could be showing any middle-aged man of Mr. Spinnet's age and coloring, or someone trying to disguise himself as Mr. Spinnet. I will question Clive Metford — the wounded MP — about how much contact he'd had with Mr. Spinnet before the shooting. Was he a close personal friend, or had he only ever seen Mr. Spinnet once or twice in his life, and not at close quarters? Didn't he lose a lot of blood after he was shot, which could affect his recall? Is he completely certain about the gunman's identity? Was he in a position to tell Mr. Spinnet from any other man who bore a passing resemblance to him?

"By the way", she said suddenly, "we're not calling him as a witness, because he's not, but a Mr. —" she rifled through some papers on her lap; "— Rudy Afton will be watching the trial. We plan to make good use of him. Wasn't easy, but my assistant put a blurry photo of Mr. Spinnet in an advert in several tabloids, asking whether anyone knew who it was, because of a possible legacy, and the response was overwhelming. You'll see when you meet him, Alicia; our Mr. Afton is a dead ringer for your dad. And many of the other men we found are close enough. We've invited five of them to the trial, in addition to Mr. Afton. When Metford testifies, I will ask him about each and every one of those other men who will be in the room — I admit, I'm tempted to use magic to put Mr. Afton in Mr. Spinnet's place and vice versa, but I daren't. It would look like I was trying to help my client escape."

She smiled at Sirius; he looked startled. "Oh, of course." Harry wondered whether he'd been paying attention. He appeared to have been gazing at Alicia, who was oblivious.

"So!" Cecilia said, smiling with satisfaction. "We're set. The hostile witness will probably be our best bet, with the Mr. Spinnet-ringers our backup plan. The crown will, of course, behave as if nothing were simpler

than to see that he's guilty. Mr. Spinnet is seen in the film, they'll say. Fingerprints on the gun, they'll say. And we'll knock down each argument. Plus — when all is said and done, the weakest part of their case is this: *no motive*. Scotland Yard cannot, *absolutely cannot*, produce a motive. Your father", she said, nodding at Alicia, "will say in his testimony that he had no reason to wish for the whip to be dead, nor Mr. Metford. He was asleep until he was rudely awakened by the police who arrested him. That's another thing that helps us — he didn't behave like a guilty man. He was asleep in his office after shooting two people in cold blood, knowing that it would be filmed by the security camera? He'll be testifying to his knowledge of the cameras, as well. He knew — so why would he commit a crime he knew would be recorded in that manner? And then go quietly to have a lie down, where he'd be easy to catch? It's ludicrous."

Alicia smiled gratefully at her and put her hand over Cecilia's. "Thank you for everything. I can see Sirius was right — you're very capable. I must go now, however. Time to feed the baby. Thank you so much." She squeezed Cecilia's hand briefly before rising to leave.

"I'll walk you out", Sirius said suddenly. "Be right back", he said to Harry and Cecilia.

After Alicia and Sirius were gone, Cecilia put down her teacup and settled back comfortably on the couch. "How funny to be back at Hogwarts, after all these years! I never thought I'd see this place again. I swore that I wouldn't ever come back, in fact."

"Why?" Harry wanted to know. Cecilia snorted.

"Well, I have to admit, it was largely because of Sirius. He and I dated for a little while, after your mum and dad's wedding. I was a bridesmaid in the wedding."

Harry hit his forehead. "That's why you look familiar! You're in the wedding photos!" And then he realized where else he'd seen her — she was the pretty blonde girl sitting with his mother at the Gryffindor table, when he and Hermione had gone into Snape's Pensieve.

Cecilia laughed, shaking her head. "You look so like your father", she said softly. "Although I can see Lily there, too. I was a good friend of your mother's. Well, I could have been a better friend. I was dreadful after she became a prefect — catty and jealous about it. Are fifteen-year-old girls still like that? I was one of the most dreadful specimens imaginable. That will haunt me someday, I'm certain. My Becky is only six, but I'm already

bracing myself for those horrid teenage years", Cecilia said, smiling ruefully.

Harry grinned at her. "I'm sure it won't be that bad. So — you can tell me the truth about Sirius and girls", he said, waggling his eyebrows.

Cecilia frowned. "I'm not sure I can. Yes, he had loads of girlfriends in school. I was nervous about dating him after the wedding, although he claimed to have changed —"

Harry put his hand on his chest in mock-shock. "Are you implying that he was just —"

"— saying that to get me into bed? Oh, please. He'd have said anything in those days, if he thought —", she stopped herself, but Harry reddened anyway. "But I *wanted* to believe he'd changed. I did. When your mum first came to Hogwarts, she had a crush on Sirius, you know. When she talked about him I had to bite my tongue because — well, I felt the same way. I never admitted that to her — she was my friend, and she'd — well, claimed him. But he wasn't interested in her, even mocked her. He was a real prat about it. Then, just when she decided to give up on him, he made a pass at her —"

"Yeah. I heard about that."

She laughed, shaking her head. "I was furious with her. Who did she think she was to reject *Sirius Black*? I wasn't entirely rational. I had some other girlfriends in Hufflepuff who had the privilege of listening to me rant about it. Poor girls!"

"Well, didn't that work out well for you, then?" Harry said, trying to be conciliatory.

"You'd think so, but I could tell, even after she was with James, that he still fancied her. Which made me cross with your mum quite a lot. And she didn't know why, of course. Teenage girls can be just horrid, horrid creatures..."

Harry smiled at her. "You seem to be all right now."

She laughed. "After twenty years, I should hope so. And after I decided it was a bunch of rot to worry about her having fancied him and went out with him anyway, I discovered that he was *still* carrying a torch for her. He'd been best man at the wedding! I found it rather hard, being in her shadow again like that. We were on-again, off-again for a couple of years after their wedding, until the night —" Her breath caught; she went on

with some difficulty. "Until the night your parents were killed", she said softly.

Harry sat forward. "Were you the date in Hertfordshire?"

She nodded. "He told you about that, did he?"

"Only that that was where he was before he went to see what had happened. He knew *something* was up because of a memory charm my mum had put on him. Long story."

Cecilia nodded. "He left very abruptly. And then, the next thing I know, I'm hearing about Lily and James being killed, you surviving the attack, You-Know-Who being gone... It was baffling. And in the midst of it all, not a word from Sirius. *Then* I find out that he's killed Peter Pettigrew and a load of Muggles and that he's been apprehended by the Ministry, suspected of having betrayed your parents. I recalled how he'd left the restaurant so suddenly... I 'realized' it was because he'd gone to tell You-Know-Who how to find James and Lily. I just assumed he was guilty. But then —"

"What?" Harry said, frowning.

"Well, it didn't add up for me. He adored your mother. Always said he'd do anything for her, or for your dad. And you could tell he really meant it." She shook her head. "But even though I had doubts, I didn't say anything, and Sirius was sent to prison with no trial. The wizarding world was celebrating the disappearance of You-Know-Who, and I was nursing a broken heart. I didn't want anything else to do with wizards or magic. I felt completely disillusioned — not least with myself, for not having said anything. To put it succinctly, I ran away. After acquiring the necessary documents, I enrolled in a Muggle university and eventually became a lawyer. Somehow — I thought that if Sirius had had a good lawyer to draw out the details of what had really happened, he never would have gone to prison. I was very, very angry about so-called wizarding 'justice'. It was a travesty. I decided to champion people unjustly accused of crimes. Or even justly accused, to see that they received a fair trial, so the crown had to *work* to convict, instead of making it easy for them. It shouldn't be easy to put *anyone* in prison. If you're going to take away someone's freedom, you'd damn well better work hard to *prove* that it should be taken away. I don't care what they're supposed to have done."

"Amen!" Sirius said with fervor, returning from taking Alicia to her rooms.

Harry saw Cecilia color a little. "Were your ears burning? We were talking about you."

"Sounded more like a soapbox speech to me. Shouldn't you be doing that in Hyde Park?"

"Oh, *you*." He grinned at her. "You always did like to puncture me whenever there was a risk of my being too puffed up. Derek does that now."

"Derek?" Harry asked, trying to stifle his laughter; the words 'puffed up' and 'puncture', caused him involuntarily to think of Aunt Marge.

"My husband. Muggle. Rather shocked when I told him I'm a witch. We met at uni."

"I like Derek, really I do", Sirius said, with his eyebrows raised. "But couldn't you have married someone named, I don't know — 'Smith'?"

Cecilia rolled her eyes. "Just be glad I didn't hyphenate my name after I married. 'Cecilia Ratkowski-Oberholtzer' would be just too much." Sirius laughed.

Harry excused himself and let them continue to catch up. He returned to the common room and found Ron, Hermione and Ginny at a table near the windows. He told them that it sounded possible that Alicia's dad could be acquitted and they were all very glad to hear it. Harry gazed at Ginny, smiling back at him, and discreetly passed a note to her asking her to meet him at the top of the Astronomy Tower. It wasn't easy to find time to be alone, but it was one of the only things helping him to keep his sanity. And he didn't want to rely on other people anymore, if at all possible. Ron and Hermione seemed to have made up, but he still shuddered when remembering the Dueling Club meeting.

When he arrived at the top of the tower, there were snow drifts at the edges of the observation deck and Ginny was shivering, waiting for him. He kissed her lightly and said, "You know what I miss? Flying with you."

She gazed up at him, smiling broadly. "Oh, I do too! Do you think we should?"

"Well — just a little." He closed his eyes, executing the change. His paws touched down on the stone flags; he looked up at her, letting out a loud, rumbling purr when she started stroking his velvety coat. He'd hoped it would be easier to keep his desires in check if he wasn't in his human form, but now he wasn't so sure. She threw one leg over his back and he spread his wings and leapt into the air, feeling her knees gripping him, her

fingers in his mane. Then all of their cares and worries dropped away as he banked and soared. He was with Ginny and they were flying together again; very little else seemed to matter.

* * *

Late afternoon sun streamed into Sirius' bedroom the next day as he finished packing and picked up his bag. After the cloudy Sunday, Monday's sky had been clear blue above the frosted landscape, lifting everyone's spirits. Everyone, that is, except for Harry, who was arguing with Sirius again. Sirius turned to Harry now; he'd opened his mouth to speak. "No, Harry. For the last time, you cannot come. You will miss too much school."

Harry closed his mouth again; Sirius was getting far too good at the parental 'no'. Harry felt a little sulky. He used to think it would be hard to argue with Sirius, but was finding it easier and easier. *Perhaps that means we're relating more like a seventeen-year-old boy and his dad*, he thought.

"You're missing school. All of your lessons are canceled until you're back."

"He's right, Harry", Hermione said, hefting Arne onto her hip more securely, putting her cheek on his downy head. Ron was leaning against the wall with crossed arms, frowning. He seemed alarmed that Hermione enjoyed helping to take care of the baby as much as she did. She was tending to him now so Alicia could pack for the London trip. Cecilia was with her; she'd spent the night in Alicia's rooms in the staff wing.

"So", Harry said, trying to sound casual, as he took a different tack; "how do you think this trip will affect your relationship with Alicia?"

Sirius turned with a start. "My *what*? There's — there's no relationship, Harry. I don't know what you think you saw —"

"What I saw was you in bed with Alicia in your dog form, you staying in the room with her when she was dressing, and you not bothering to avert your eyes when she was nursing. You looked like you wanted to —"

"Harry!" Hermione sounded shocked; Harry was slightly shocked himself by how daring he was being. His stomach was flipping and flopping a bit; it hadn't been easy to get up his nerve to do this. He had thought a great deal about Sirius and his mother in his other life, to prepare. At the end, he and Sirius hadn't been very friendly. And he'd had more than one screaming match with his mother. His godfather stared at

him in disbelief. Ron looked like he was straining some internal organs from the effort needed not to laugh.

"Plus, she looks rather like a younger version of Cecilia, whom you used to date."

"I am keeping an eye on her. Cecilia did that last night. Alicia likes having 'Snuffles' around for company. People are less guarded around animals. I won't be able to do that in London. There's no plausible way to explain how the dog got there."

Harry looked grim. "You're certain? You don't fancy her? No objectivity problems?"

"Harry! She's eighteen years younger than me!"

Harry shrugged. "So? How old were you when you went to prison?"

Sirius frowned, sitting on the bed. "What does that matter? I was twenty-one."

Hermione looked like she understood now. "I think I see where Harry's going with this. He seems to think you're arrested at the age of twenty-one — no pun intended — so that it's perfectly plausible for you to fancy a twenty-year old girl."

Harry grimaced. "Yeah. Basically. I wouldn't use the same words, but the meaning's the same. And you used to have so many girlfriends, but as far as I know, there hasn't been anyone since you escaped from prison. Now you're spending almost all of your non-teaching time with Alicia, and when you're in your dog form, she hugs and cuddles you and talks sweetly to you. You're telling me that's having no affect on you?"

Sirius stood and picked his bag up again. "I'm not listening to any more of this —"

"Hermione, Ron, can you go to the other room for a minute?" Harry said abruptly. Ron raised an eyebrow, and Harry knew he probably would have no trouble hearing them still, but he steered Hermione out of the room and Harry and Sirius were alone. Harry walked to his godfather so they were toe-to-toe. He gazed into Sirius' dark eyes and said, "I'm sorry I was rude, especially in front of Hermione and Ron, but I'm only asking because I'm worried. About her hurting you. She was being manipulated before and was pursuing me while under Imperius. Roger also had her under Imperius. I think she'd still do whatever he said if he showed up. Don't forget: it's possible that she can't be trusted."

Sirius suddenly pulled Harry to him in a bear hug, patting his back firmly before releasing him. Harry frowned at him. Sirius laughed a little and looked like he was wiping tears from his eyes briefly. "You know, sometimes, it's like your dad is here again, trying to talk sense to me and looking like he feels he's banging his head on a brick wall..."

Harry smiled at him. "Was my dad that rude? I had no idea." Sirius laughed.

"Yeah, sometimes tact really escaped James. And your mum always spoke her mind. I'd wondered how you turned out to be so well-mannered. *Usually*", he added, smirking.

Harry's smile grew and he hugged Sirius now, feeling quite suddenly as though he really were seeing a father off on a trip. "Just be careful, all right? And by the way, who's going to be visiting Jeffries to keep an eye on *him* while you're gone?"

Sirius shrugged. "No one. Honestly, Harry. Jeffries seems to be no threat. I mean, everyone who comes in contact with him is so *happy*! Your aunt is certainly in her element. I've even spotted witches and wizards attending. Oh, a lot of what they do isn't noticed by Muggles, but I can spot the little things that distinguish them, of course."

Harry grimaced. "And now we also know that Neville's Great Uncle Algie was healed by Jeffries." He hesitated for a moment, then said, "And me, too."

"You too what?" Sirius said, striding toward the door.

"He — he healed me, too."

Sirius stopped dead and dropped his bag again. "What? You never said anything!"

"I — I never told anyone. At all. He somehow got through security at St. Mungo's. He came to my room and healed my burns. He left me a letter. I still don't know why he did it —"

Sirius looked at him, baffled. "Then why are you still suspicious of him, Harry? I don't know why you have to be so paranoid. Save it for the important things. I don't think we should expend any more energy on Rodney Jeffries. We need to find the missing dragons or work out what's to be done with them, we need to constantly reassess our estimation of who's a Death Eater and who isn't. We have to try to find out what Voldemort will be up to next. We have to work out who framed Alicia's dad and preferably prevent him from going to prison. That's quite enough without

expending energy on a harmless faith healer whom everyone likes — wizard and Muggle. I admit, I was suspicious of him at first. But I haven't seen anything to really warrant that — even his getting past hospital security, which he could have done with assistance from a well-meaning witch or wizard. He did heal you. As far as his knowing about the magical world — he saw Voldemort attack him, after all, and remembers it vividly. I've heard the story so often now I could probably tell it myself. I don't think any of the Muggles who hear it really understand what he's describing, but that's probably why Fudge is still a bit worried about him — he might draw Muggle attention to the wizarding world. However, I'm having a difficult time finding someone Fudge doesn't like to be all bad." He grinned; Harry knew what Sirius thought of Fudge.

"I reckon you're right", Harry said reluctantly, not really believing his own words, and not very pleased to realize that the one person in the wizarding world who seemed to agree with him on Rodney Jeffries was Cornelius Fudge, even if it was for very different reasons.

* * *

The trial began and they were able to read stories about it when Hermione's parents sent her copies of the *Times*. The verdict was expected on Thursday. On Friday morning, Ron looked startled when they entered the Great Hall; he stared at the place next to McGonagall, occupied as usual by a man who was the spitting image of their headmaster, with a long white beard and hair, half-moon spectacles flashing in the candlelight.

"He's back", Ron whispered to Harry, grinning. "It's Professor Dumbledore."

Harry smiled at the headmaster, who raised his goblet of pumpkin juice in a silent toast. But what started off as a cheerful breakfast soon spiraled downward after the post owls soared in through the clerestory windows. Hermione sat looking grimly at her copy of the *Times* after she'd removed it from the owl's leg, then held it up for Harry to see. Alicia's father was going to prison. He'd been convicted. Harry grimaced.

"Sod that. Cecilia seemed to have such a good case, too." Then something else on the front page caught his eye. "What's that other story there, Hermione? Near the bottom."

Hermione turned the paper over and looked at the article. "Oh, god. That awful woman who took Mr. Spinnet's place has had another dreadful

idea that will only benefit the rich and make life abysmal for everyone else..."

"I was wondering because in the picture —" He put out his hand and Hermione gave him the paper; "— it looks just like —" He trailed off, staring at the photograph, which showed the MP and her daughter getting into a car outside their rather large house, also familiar...

"What is it, Harry?" Ginny asked, sitting beside him.

He didn't answer her, but continued to gawp at the photograph of the member of Parliament representing Mole Valley, the woman who'd taken over from Mr. Spinnet after he'd been arrested. Or rather, he stared at the photograph of her daughter.

"*Felice*", he whispered.

"Who? What did you say?" Ginny frowned. She looked at Hermione, who shrugged.

He looked up and saw Sirius, Alicia and Cecilia in the entrance hall; they must have come from London on the overnight train to Hogsmeade, he reckoned. He strode toward them with the newspaper. He was vaguely aware of Ron, Hermione and Ginny following. The three travelers all looked quite grim. Harry nodded awkward at Alicia, carrying the baby in a sling again. "I'm — I'm sorry about your dad, Alicia", he said quietly. She nodded; her eyes looked red, as though she'd been crying.

"I need to get him into his cot", she said softly, looking down at the baby. "It's been a long trip." She turned and began to climb the marble stairs. Harry watched her go, then waved the newspaper in front of Sirius and whispered urgently.

"There's something you should know. About that woman who replaced Mr. Spinnet. I think that either she, her daughter — or both of them — are witches."

Sirius' jaw dropped. "*What?* How do you —"

"Not only that", Harry said, showing Sirius the photograph. "She", he said, stabbing Felice's picture with his finger, "was shagging Draco this last summer. They have an estate in New Stokington where we were doing landscaping work. Draco found those wizarding photos *under her mother's bed*. When Alicia first said who was taking over from her father, she called her Jane Hampton-something. But it's not. It's Joan Harrington-Smyth. The daughter is Felice Harrington-Smyth. They hired wizard gardeners to work

at their house — which just *happened* to include me, Draco, and Aberforth — and then the daughter just *happened* to seduce Draco..."

Sirius looked around nervously, while Cecilia looked shocked. "I think we need to discuss this privately", he said quietly, looking into the Great Hall; Harry followed his gaze and found Draco Malfoy looking back from the Slytherin table. "Come on."

However, once they were in Sirius' sitting room, Cecilia started pacing nervously, running her hands through her short blonde hair. "Can someone tell me what's going on? Are you telling me my client was framed so a witch could take his place in Parliament?"

Sirius grimaced. "Well, magic would explain how the crown sabotaged the case."

Hermione's brow was furrowed. "Harry told us it looked rather good."

Cecilia started waving her arms around agitatedly. "I really need a fag, Sirius. Please?"

"Fine", he said, and she produced a cigarette out of thin air. She flicked it and it was magically lit; as she inhaled nervously, starting to look a little calmer.

"Haven't smoked for over a year; bad habit from uni, long hours of revision. But losing this case just makes me feel —" She shook her head, holding the cigarette between the first two fingers of her right hand, which she was now waving in a circle. "How's a person supposed to put on a defense when all the crown's witnesses just lie through their teeth?"

Harry gawped at her. "They just — lied?"

Cecilia took another drag. "No other word for it. Metford claimed he'd known Mr. Spinnet for ages, that he'd recognize him anywhere, he was even at Alicia's wedding. He had a photo of himself with Alicia and her dad on her wedding day. Alicia refuted this, saying he'd clearly altered a real photo, but it all started to sound petty. 'Experts have verified that this photo has not been tampered with', Cartwright said. 'Wouldn't you naturally deny that you'd invited Mr. Metford to your wedding?' Cartwright asked her. Stupid, insufferable prat! I *hate* Gardner Cartwright! Self-righteous, pompous —"

"Cecilia", Sirius said gently.

She sighed and took another drag. "Now you see what poor Derek has to put up with when I lose. I'm a raving lunatic for a week after. At any rate, there were other lies. *Plus* all of our ringers mysteriously didn't show.

When I went back to the office, I found that every one of them had received a letter — on stationery from my office, mind you — telling them that their services were not needed after all. They were all rather surprised and had been ringing up my clerk, who didn't know anything about it. Bloody hell. You don't know what a panic I was in when I realized that Afton and the others weren't there. But even so — it looked like we *might* have swayed the jury. How wrong we were..."

Hermione said tentatively, "Is it possible that someone could have put the jurors under Imperius? Just in case the lying and so forth didn't work?"

Cecilia looked startled. "Yes. Of course. How silly of me not to think of that. Magic would explain the letters on my office stationery, as well. The real question, however, is this: who leaked our defense strategy? There's no other way anyone could have known about those six men who look like Mr. Spinnet. Not to mention their exact identities and their addresses."

"Someone probably also used magic to alter the wedding photo", Harry added.

"Yes, well *that* we knew. But we couldn't dwell on the details of the wedding because of the little 'incident' during the reception. The eerie thing was that when Metford was sitting there, calmly stating that he'd been to the wedding — he also had all of the details right, down to the food and the groomsmen wearing kilts — he looked very calm and not a bit like he was lying. I *wish* I'd had a way to challenge his assertion that he'd been there, but he had everything right, according to Alicia, and all we had was Alicia and her dad saying, 'He wasn't there', while Metford was waving his photo about and talking about the delicious wedding cake. Well, not at the same time, of course."

Sirius looked like he'd had a brainstorm. "Third eyes", he said suddenly, making Cecilia frown. "We had a problem with third eyes at Ascog Castle last summer. Magical listening and watching devices. Someone may have planted third eyes in your office."

Cecilia waved her hand and suddenly it was holding a glass ashtray, into which she flicked some ash from her cigarette. It was odd for Harry to see someone dressed completely as a Muggle performing magic. "Can you help me root them out, Sirius? Not that we probably need to worry about them now —"

"Oh, aren't you going to appeal?" Hermione asked. Ron frowned.

"What's that?" he wanted to know. But rather than answering him, Cecilia stared.

"You're the werewolf, aren't you?" she said, motioning to him with her cigarette. "Bill and Charlie Weasley's brother, right?"

"Right", he said slowly, clearly not liking that she'd started with the 'werewolf' comment.

But Cecilia nodded. "Bill and Charlie were in — what was it, Sirius? Fourth and second year when we were in seventh?"

"Third and first, I think."

"Right. Charlie didn't play for Gryffindor until we were out of school. More's the pity. They were nice boys", she said, giving Ron a motherly smile. Then the smile disappeared. "It was so terrible when I heard about — about their little sisters —" Then Ginny caught her eye; her resemblance to Ron was unmistakable. She looked startled. "But who —"

"I'm another sister", Ginny said, smiling. "I'm Ginny Weasley. And we've actually *found* one of my missing sisters! She's —"

"Why don't we have some tea?" Hermione said loudly, popping up and 'inadvertently' treading on Ginny's toe, making her cry out. Ginny had evidently forgotten that no one was to know Maggie was their sister. She bit her lip in pain after her initial cry.

"God, yes. I could so use a good cuppa —" Cecilia said, finally throwing herself into a chair and slipping off her shoes, putting her feet onto an ottoman. "And then I really should get back to London. My daughter has a violin recital in the morning. Along with all of her teacher's other students. I can't miss two hours of ungodly screeching, now can I? I've already made an appointment with my doctor tomorrow afternoon; if I don't get a migraine, I'll just have to cancel —" she said with an ironic half-smile.

They settled down to tea after Sirius conjured what they needed, listening to Cecilia rehash some of the other lies that had made an acquittal impossible. When it was time for her to leave, they walked her and Sirius to the entrance hall and before walking out the large front door of the castle, she put her hands on Harry's shoulders.

"It's nice to see you again, Harry. The last time I saw you before your parents went into hiding, you weren't much bigger than little Arne. Please promise me you'll stay safe", she said softly.

"I'll do my best", he said, smiling at his mother's old friend, remembering again the girl in the Pensieve. She nodded and followed Sirius out the door.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny walked into the Great Hall, which was deserted, and sat dejectedly at the Gryffindor table, where the rest of Hermione's newspapers were still sitting, just where she'd left them. They all seemed to be rather deflated after the news of Mr. Spinnet's conviction. Luckily, seventh-year Gryffindors didn't have a lesson until the middle of the morning on Friday, and while Ginny should have been in her first lesson, Hermione promised to get her out of it with a handy little note from the Head Girl. They all looked listlessly down at the newspapers; Harry idly pulled the *Guardian* toward him and began to peruse it. There was another story about Joan Harrington-Smyth. Ginny put her head on his shoulder, reading along; he turned his head for a moment and pressed his lips to her brow, and she gave him a small smile.

Ron and Hermione were sharing the *Daily Prophet*, and after turning a page, Hermione gasped, making Harry look up. Ron was staring at it, too, swearing softly.

"*Bloody hell.*"

"What? What?" Harry and Ginny prompted them; Harry wondered whether there was something about Mrs. Harrington-Smyth. Then he realized that of course there wouldn't be anything about her in the *Prophet*, even though she might be a witch. Ron and Hermione didn't answer immediately; they were moving their eyes rapidly over the text.

"The Aurors", Ron finally said softly.

"Did you say *the horror*? Didn't know you watched Muggle films, Ron", Harry said.

"No, he said 'the Aurors'," Hermione said more loudly. "A convoy of Aurors in twenty-five little boats took the Death Eaters who'd surrendered to Remus to Azkaban. The trials are over. There were three Aurors to every Death Eater. No boats have come back to Banff from Azkaban fortress. Owls to the prison aren't being answered."

The four of them stared at each other. Harry remembered that ride to Azkaban across the chilly waters of the North Sea. "Are you telling me *seventy-five* Aurors are missing? Does it say whether anyone knows what's happened? Who's to blame?"

Ron looked very grim as he tossed the paper to Harry so he could read it for himself. "Oh, the Ministry's fairly certain they know who's to blame, all right", he said, the angry edge in his voice impossible to miss. Harry goggled at him, hoping that Ron didn't seriously expect him to read the entire article when he could just tell him the answer.

"Well, *who?*" he said to his best friend, whose mouth was drawn into a thin, angry line; there was a slight reddish light in his eyes as he lifted them to Harry.

"Remus Lupin."

Salvage

Harry and Ginny stared across the Gryffindor table at Ron and Hermione.

"Remus Lupin!" Harry exclaimed. "They think Remus had something to do with all of those Aurors disappearing?" The Great Hall was very quiet and still around them, Harry's words echoing in the nearly-empty space.

Hermione looked rather pained. "Well, they *did* all insist upon surrendering to *him* in particular after the Gringotts siege..."

Ron recoiled from her. "Hermione! How can you say that?"

"I don't mean I agree! I meant — I can see how the Ministry might think that looked suspicious. It was *obviously* an attempt on the part of the Death Eaters to discredit Remus. This proves it. We know he couldn't possibly be on the same side as them, but the Ministry still has a lot of ingrained anti-werewolf prejudice", she added softly, looking sadly at Ron. Ginny also looked morosely at her brother.

Harry grimaced and took the paper from Hermione, glancing quickly through the article. "It's another Daisy Furuncle story", he said dully. "Or should I say — Narcissa Malfoy?"

"*Narcissa Malfoy*?" Ginny said, mouth open. Harry had forgotten that she didn't know about the true identity of Daisy Furuncle. The three of them explained about what they saw in Ron's Omnioculars.

"She spends plenty of time slamming Remus, naturally", Harry said, still looking at the article. "Nothing new there. Perhaps her continuing anti-werewolf kick is because Nita was so upset with her for writing that story about you, Ron, and they're still on the outs..."

Hermione dropped her jaw. "You know about that?"

Ginny raised her hand. "I think I need to get caught up again..."

Harry looked up casually. "Yeah. I told Ron I knew he'd been writing to her." He turned to Ginny. "They got to know each other when he was in hospital."

Ron looked at Hermione sheepishly. "Harry thought I was cheating on you with a woman ten years older than me." Hermione and Ginny didn't speak, but after a moment of looking like they were trying to restrain themselves, started laughing very hard, their eyes scrunched up. Harry

thought they might hurt themselves. Ron looked rather put-out. "It could happen, you know", he said with an injured air, above the sound of their raucous laughter. "Not me cheating on you", he said hastily to Hermione. "I mean — her being interested — or rather — oh, I'll just shut up now —" he mumbled as the laughter continued unabated. Finally, Hermione pulled his mouth to hers in a quick kiss, grinning at him, and soon he was grinning back.

Harry held up the paper to read the rest of the article (and to possibly hide Ron and Hermione doing anything else), grinning briefly to Ginny behind the shelter of the page. But when he continued reading the article, he very quickly stopped smiling and lowered the paper to the table once more, finding Ron and Hermione locked in a deep kiss.

"Oy! Come up for air! Something important here!" They separated, both coloring. "There's a list of names. The Aurors who've gone missing", he said quietly. He paused, swallowing, looking at Ron and Ginny in turn, unsure how to say it. When he looked at Ginny, he couldn't tear his eyes away from hers; she looked away first, pulling the paper to her slowly so she could read the list herself.

"*Percy Weasley*", she whispered, raising her eyes to meet Ron's gaze.

"Oh no", Hermione breathed, covering her mouth with her hand.

"And Harry!" Ginny exclaimed now, looking at the list again. "Not just Percy —"

"I know it's not just Percy, there were seventy-fi —"

"Katie."

Harry stopped dead, immediately picturing Katie in his mind, Katie working in the hot summer sun, Katie laughing with him as they had dinner at the Leaky Cauldron, Katie at the European Cup —

"Oh, god", he said softly, looking down at the list again. *Kathryn Bell*. He'd gone right to the bottom of the list, assuming that it would be alphabetical, looking for Ron and Ginny's older brother. After staring at Katie's name for a half minute, he said, "I'll bet Sam doesn't read the *Prophet* these days. Ron and Hermione — since Professor Dumbledore only just this morning appeared at breakfast for the first time, Aberforth may not have left the castle yet. Go up to the headmaster's office and see if he's still about. Sam shouldn't hear about this from a stranger; it should be from a friend. And Aberforth's the best friend he's got." He could barely

choke out the words, thinking, *They have to be all right... Katie and Percy have to be all right...*

"What are you going to do?" Ron asked as he and Hermione rose to go.

"Ginny and I will go to Snape's office. We can use his fire to call Hog's End — and the Burrow. And he can tell Maggie. I think he should definitely be the one..." He was having trouble speaking without sounding like he had a frog in his throat now. He remembered the expert way Percy had handled things at the European Cup, impersonating his own father. Ginny patted his arm as though *he* were the one who had a missing brother — and maybe, in a way, he did.

Ron nodded and he and Hermione strode purposefully out of the Great Hall. Harry stood and started walking in the opposite direction.

"Where are you going, Harry? The stairs to the dungeon are this way", Ginny said, perplexed.

"This is a shortcut. Come on."

She followed him silently to the door behind the head table; after he opened it, he took out his wand and lit it, and he was glad to see that she followed suit without question. They each held their wands aloft with their right hands while clutching at the stone wall with their left hands, the stones slightly damp to the touch. They climbed cautiously down the steep stone steps, finally reaching the bottom; Harry thought something brushed by the bottom of his robes, and he tried not to imagine what it might be. They shuffled along slowly for a while, their breathing sounding abnormally loud in the underground passage, until they'd come to where Harry thought he remembered the secret entrance being that led to Snape's office.

"The Seer shall be Seen."

Harry froze. "What?" he asked Sandy.

"What?" Ginny whispered to Harry. "Did Sandy say something?"

Harry couldn't imagine what Sandy could mean; he didn't have any plans to take her out of his shirt, or to take his robes and shirt off. "Let's just try to get this open", he whispered back to Ginny, deciding that he'd just have to wait and see about what Sandy had said. He wasn't sure why he was whispering; it just felt like the right thing to do when standing in a dank secret passage. He felt for and found the crack in the wall that indicated where the door was and began to push, Ginny putting her shoulder into it as well to speed up the process. The door finally gave way

and pivoted in the middle, revealing Snape's office in all its depressing glory.

Embarrassingly enough, it also revealed Severus Snape sitting in the wing chair by the fire with Maggie Dougherty on his lap. Harry's jaw dropped and he gasped. At the sound, Maggie and Snape looked up, and Maggie — looking unsurprised — was forced to stand, as Snape sprang to his feet, his face dark with anger.

"How dare you! This is a complete abuse of —"

"We — we're sorry! We would have come the other way, but then the students might panic — speaking of which, why are you in here together when you're scheduled to have a classroom of students sitting out there right now?" *Did I finally catch Severus Snape in a misstep?* he wondered. He strode to the door leading to the classroom, lifting a corner of the curtain that shielded the window in the door and seeing a room full of Gryffindors and Slytherins. They were third years; Harry spotted Will Flitwick and Jamaica Thomas sitting together in the fourth row.

"Now, Severus, it isn't as though I didn't warn you!" Maggie said to him with her arms crossed on her chest as she smirked at him. "I *told* you Harry and Ginny were going to walk in, but *you* said you'd put a foolproof locking charm on the door to the classroom... And as for why I am here", she said, turning to Harry and her sister, "I came down to pick up some ingredients for a Divination exercise — scrying", she said, as though what she'd actually been doing wasn't the furthest possible thing from her intended errand. "And what are the pair of *you* doing here, anyway?" she said, turning the tables in big-sister fashion. "Shouldn't you both be in a lesson?"

"We're here because there's something you should know, Maggie, and we thought Professor Snape should tell you", Harry said. "But now — you'll just wind up hearing it from us after all, I reckon. We also wanted to ask Professor Snape whether we could use his fire to talk to some people..."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Tell her what? Talk to whom? What is going on, Potter? Spit it out!" he snapped.

Harry drew his lips into a line; he told them about the missing Aurors and then said, "Percy's one of them", very softly.

Maggie's legs couldn't hold her up suddenly, and Ginny joined her on the floor, holding her sister tightly and whispering to her, "*I know, I know*"

— "

Harry also crouched, to talk to her. "So — you didn't see this coming? Not that I'm criticizing. I just meant —"

She shook her head. "That's all right. I know what you mean. No, not an inkling." Harry waited for Sandy to say something to him about Seers not choosing what they see, but for once she remained silent during an otherwise excellent opportunity to give Harry her opinion about Seeing. Maggie lifted shining eyes to Harry. "I've only recently got my family back! Am I supposed to just accept losing one of them now?" she choked as Ginny hugged her tightly.

He crouched down to talk to her, shaking his head. "No. Definitely not. We are going to get him back. And the others, too."

"But — but *how*?"

Harry stepped closer to Snape and whispered to him, "The thing is — in order to get those Aurors back, I think that this calls for someone to break *into* Azkaban. And the only two people — not counting Barty Crouch, Jr. — who've broken *out* of it are me and Sirius..."

"But that was in — in your other life —" Snape hissed at him.

"So?" Harry responded.

"Are you seriously telling me that after *escaping* that place, you want to go *back*?"

"Do you have a better idea?" Harry whispered fiercely. He stepped back from Snape then and said in a normal voice, "At any rate, we need to call the Burrow and Hog's End, make sure the whole family knows what's going on."

Snape nodded agreement at this and walked to the fire, pinching some Floo powder between thumb and forefinger.

"The Burrow!" he exclaimed, throwing it into the fire.

Molly Weasley's head appeared in the fire box. "Oh, it's you", she said, sniffing into a handkerchief. "I thought maybe — some news from the Ministry — oh, you very likely have no idea what I'm talking about —"

"Percy", Snape said shortly, his voice surprisingly gentle.

Harry stepped to the fire. "Don't worry, Mrs. Weasley. We'll get him back."

Mrs. Weasley looked up at him, startled. "Oh, Harry! I didn't see you there..."

Ginny stepped forward. "I'm here as well, Mum", she said softly.

"Ginny! So you know! I was hoping — you might not have heard yet — "

"Maggie's here too. And Ron knows, as well", she told her mother. "We were going to call you, then call at Hog's End, to see whether they know. They should, as Percy lives there."

Molly Weasley blew her nose on a flowered handkerchief. "The last time Percy and I spoke we had another row! I've been trying to tell him — tell him that he isn't cut out to be an Auror!" she cried, distraught. "I told him that he'd get himself killed! How could I have said that?" she asked, her face twisting in disgust at herself. "I should have been proud of him, and instead I was being selfish at the thought that I might lose him —"

Harry drew his mouth into a line. "It's all right, Mrs. Weasley. I'm sure he's just fine", he said, even though he was not sure of any such thing. "You take care of yourself. We need to call Hog's End —"

Molly sniffed again. "You take care of yourself, too, Harry. Thank you for calling, Severus." Harry was jolted for a moment by Mrs. Weasley being on a first-name basis with Snape. "Goodbye, girls", she added with a sad, motherly smile before her head disappeared.

Harry was the one who threw the powder into the fire and said, "Hog's End." Fred's face popped into the firebox this time. He looked a little less morose than his mother, but only a little.

"Fred Weasley here, creative genius at Weasley Wizard Wheezes", he recited in an automatic-sounding monotone. "Hang on and I'll get my Quick-Quotes Quill, as you probably have a message for our presiden — Oh! Harry! It's you. Sorry. Loads of people have been calling, wondering whether their orders are going to be filled. See, Perce's had a spot of trouble", he said, clearing his throat.

Harry nodded. "We know. We didn't know if you did. How is everyone else there taking it? Katie's gone missing, too."

Fred nodded, looking very harried, and for the first time since Harry had known him, he looked truly grown-up. "I know. But the thing is — I was about to use the fire to call Madam Pomfrey. We need to get her here pretty soon. It's not urgent in the next five minutes, but in another hour it may be..."

Harry frowned. "Why?"

Fred grinned now. "Angelina's in labor. George is upstairs with her now. Lee's not here, unfortunately. On a trip to London. So Angelina just

has us until Madam Pomfrey gets here." He laughed for a moment upon seeing Harry's face. "Don't look like that! You have an expression like you've eaten our newest sweet for general consumption! It's a very tart-flavored chewy thing, a little like Turkish Delight in texture, but it causes you make this *face* for a few hours after you've eaten it..."

Ginny brought Maggie near the fire and Fred smiled at them. "Ginny! Maggie! Didn't know you were there!" His smile looked a bit forced.

"Oh, Fred! How soon are the babies coming?"

"Well, we *are* talking about twins. I don't imagine it'll be *that* fast. When we were growing up, I don't know how many times we heard how long it took Mum to produce me and George. Well, whenever Mum was *very* cross with us, actually", he admitted. "But even so — I should probably call Pomfrey now."

"We're going to do everything in our power to get Percy back, Fred", Harry said with determination.

Fred nodded grimly at him. "Good. Two more people will be waiting to see him when he comes back, unless you're back *very* fast, or Angelina takes a week to give birth... Gotta run..."

His head disappeared from the fire. Ginny turned and put her arms around Harry. "How are you going to do it?" she asked him, clutching him tightly.

"First — we need to talk to Sirius, I think. And Dumbledore." He looked at Snape, who nodded at him.

"I need someone to take over this class. Miss Weasley!" She jumped away from Harry and stood to attention as though he were an army officer and she a recruit. "You're a competent brewer of potions", he said with a nod to her. Harry could tell that Ginny was trying not to look pleased about the low-key compliment. "And you are a prefect. I need you to tend to these students while I go upstairs with Harry and your sister. I've written the potion of the day on the chalkboard in the classroom. You will need to patrol the worktables to guard against any unsafe potions practices and check the potions at the end of the class. Are you feeling up to it?"

Ginny swallowed; Harry didn't know that Snape had *ever* turned his class over to anyone else before. He hadn't been at all happy with the job his own uncle had done while he'd been away during Harry's sixth year. "Y — yes sir", she said quietly.

"Oh, and — should the students give you any trouble or get out of line in any way, do not hesitate to deduct house points." Would Ginny deduct points from Gryffindors? he wondered. Her eyes glittered now and he could almost feel the power emanating from her. No, he didn't think she would hesitate to do that for a minute, if it was warranted.

She lifted her chin and looked him in the eye. "I won't, sir."

He nodded to her and swept into the classroom, followed by Ginny, Maggie and Harry.

"Third year Slytherins and Gryffindors", he said in that ringing voice. "I need to discuss something of great importance with the headmaster, Miss Dougherty, and the Head Boy. Miss Weasley will be in charge of the class while I am gone. She is a prefect and you are to give her your undivided attention, as well as respect and obedience. She *will* take house points from anyone who steps one toe out of line — regardless of which house you are in... And in addition, she will have the power to give detentions — which shall be served with *me*. Are there any questions?"

You could have heard a pin drop in the room. He raised an eyebrow.

"No, Professor Snape", the frightened third years started stuttering out slowly, in an uneven ripple that took a minute to reach all of the corners of the room.

"Good!" He nodded at Ginny; despite her brave facade, she looked a bit paler than usual to Harry. "Carry on", Snape said to her with another nod. Harry gave her a reassuring smile and squeezed her hand.

As he was leaving, Harry saw Will Flitwick mouth the words, *What's going on?* Harry merely shook his head grimly as he followed Snape and Maggie into the corridor. He had to slow down to wait for them at the top of the stairs, having sprinted up without a thought, moving past them quickly. Maggie tried to keep up, but she was huffing and puffing. Snape was only a little behind Harry, as he was able to skip several steps at a time with his long legs.

Outside the headmaster's office, they ran into Aberforth, coming out of the passage with the spiral stairs. He looked like his old self again; his hair was collar-length once more, his nose appeared to be restored and his shabby clothes looked like he'd just been gardening. His brother, Ron and Hermione followed quickly on his heels.

Aberforth nodded at Harry. "Goodbye, Harry. I am leaving Winky here for the time being while I —"

"— go tell Sam", Harry said quietly. Aberforth nodded sadly.

"Yes." He sighed. "I enjoyed having Katie work for me last summer. A delightful young woman. Sam is very proud of her, you know."

Harry grimaced. "He didn't want her to be an Auror", he said softly.

Aberforth looked grim. "He has numerous bad memories of it. As do I."

"He'll appreciate that it's you telling him", Harry said. "And with any luck — soon there will be some good news."

Aberforth looked at Harry and smiled. "Yes. Hopefully." He grasped Harry's hand briefly, then strode off down the corridor.

Dumbledore looked round at them all. "Well, I do not think that the corridor is the best place to have the necessary conversation about this grave situation, do you?"

"Why don't we go to my rooms?" Maggie said suddenly.

Dumbledore smiled at her. "Excellent idea! And I don't think a little tea will come amiss, either, as talking is thirsty work..." He took Maggie's arm in his and they led the way to the staff wing. On the way to Maggie's rooms, Harry stopped and knocked on Sirius' door, getting no answer. He swore under his breath.

"Where can he be?" Hermione said softly. "Let's see, when does he teach Apparition on Friday —?"

"*Alicia's*", Harry said softly. Hermione stopped, her mouth clamped shut as though she was afraid she'd say what she thought about *that*.

As they moved along, Harry hung back, and when they were passing Alicia's door, he let the others go on and quietly knocked. After half a minute, Alicia came to the door, the baby on her hip.

"Oh, hello, Harry! What are you doing here at this hour? Don't you have a lesson?"

"Not right now. Listen, do you know where Sirius is?"

"No, I haven't seen him since breakfast." But then Harry looked past her into the room and saw a large black dog lounging near the window.

"I see Snuffles is here again", he said, drawing his mouth into a line.

She smiled, turning to look fondly at the dog. "Yes. He's such a dear."

"Yes, well — that's why I came looking for Sirius. I need to borrow Snuffles."

"Borrow? For what?"

"Well — it's not me, actually. Professor McGonagall sent me. Sirius promised her she could use Snuffles for a Transfiguration lesson."

"What?" she said, her brow furrowing. "What's she going to Transfigure that poor dog into?"

Harry looked at his godfather grimly. "Oh, she'll think of something." He patted his leg. "C'mere, Snuffles. We need your help."

The black dog stood very reluctantly and followed Harry into the corridor. Harry smiled at Alicia. "Don't worry. I'll return him in perfect working order."

When the door to Alicia's room had closed, Sirius continued to pad along beside Harry in his dog form. "What have you been getting up to then, eh?" Harry said to him. "While you've been lounging about Alicia's digs, there's been a bit of an emergency —" Harry explained the missing Aurors to him, as well as Remus being the Ministry scapegoat and Percy and Katie being among the missing. He also explained who was waiting in Maggie's rooms to discuss the problem. When they were right outside Maggie's door, Sirius Transfigured himself.

"That's dreadful, Harry", Sirius said, shaking his head. "Did you know Katie was born at Ascog Castle?"

"Erm, no", Harry said, genuinely surprised.

"Sam and Trina — Katie's mum — were there for a little celebration we were having when your mum completed her Auror training. Trina's water broke and my mum and your mum ended up delivering Katie, as Trina's midwife couldn't get there in time..."

Harry swallowed; he thought it very likely that he wouldn't be able to function very well if he had to contemplate what might have become of Katie. He remembered casting the revealing charm with her wand and seeing Rodney Jeffries' tent filled with pinkish magical signatures...

"Oh, and just so you know, I *was* actually gathering useful information in Alicia's rooms this morning, not just 'lounging about'. She received an owl. I'll have to tell you more about it later — we should probably join the others."

Harry nodded, not making a comment about Sirius 'actually gathering useful information'. When they entered Maggie's sitting room, Professor Dumbledore was in a comfortable armchair near the fire, while Snape sat in a matching armchair on the opposite side of the hearth and Ron and

Hermione were side by side on the couch facing the fire. A tea tray was on the table and Hermione was pouring, but Maggie was preparing to leave.

"I really can't stay — I was supposed to be getting the scrying ingredients and going right back to Sybill's tower! I'll find out at lunch what's happening, yeah?"

Harry nodded at her. "Of course."

When she was gone, he and Sirius joined the others, Harry settling down on the hearth rug with his back to the fire while Sirius joined Ron and Hermione on the couch. Dumbledore put down his tea and looked round at them all, giving each of them a small smile. "This", he began, "would be a very nice gathering were it not for the fact that we are here for a very serious purpose." He nodded to Ron in particular. "Your brother was one of the finest Head Boys Hogwarts has ever seen, and if there is any way to get him — and the others — back, we will find it. Unfortunately, I have some bad news", he said, turning to Harry, Snape and Sirius, "which came while we were talking in my office: the Ministry will not be sending anyone to Azkaban. Not yet, at any rate. In that they are already down by seventy-five Aurors, they are understandably nervous about losing more. They are of the opinion that a battle fought on Azkaban fortress against an entrenched enemy would be a sure defeat. They may be right."

"So Fudge isn't going to do anything?" Snape spit, eyes flashing. "He's just going to leave all of those witches and wizards there?"

"That is assuming that any of them are still alive, Severus", Dumbledore said quietly; Harry looked at his best friend in distress; Ron grasped Hermione's hand convulsively, and Harry swallowed, thinking also of Katie.

"What about the prisoners?" Sirius wanted to know. "They're just to be left there, without anyone to bring them food and water? Being sent to Azkaban isn't *meant* to be a death sentence." Harry could see that he was thinking about what would have happened to *him* if he'd never broken out.

Dumbledore sighed. "The Ministry is assuming two things. First, that the prisoners were all released, so the question of their needing food and water would be moot. Second, it is also being assumed that the Aurors were killed, or the owls that have been sent would have been returned with messages... Now, my worry, and not, I'm sad to say, the Ministry's — is that the chief purpose of this may have been to spirit away the dementors, who would be only too eager to serve Voldemort, in my opinion. If, as the

Ministry predicts, the prisoners and dementors are indeed gone and the Aurors killed — the only thing left to do is to recover the dead. There are plans to do just that, when some time has passed and it is deemed safe, but the Ministry of Magic does not see any reason to rush about that. It would be a gross misstatement to say that I merely disagree —"

"Please, sir", Harry interrupted, his stomach jumping about with impatience. "I don't mean to be rude, but — but I think I know what has to be done. And it's not to abandon the prisoners *or* the Aurors. If there's a single person alive, we should try to get them back, even if it's someone who's been kissed by a dementor. We can't just let them slowly starve. And even those who are dead — I'm not trying to say that I'm — I mean —" he faltered again. "It meant a lot to Cedric's parents that I brought his body back. I could have left him there and they would have had to hunt down the place where Voldemort had got his body back, but — they didn't have to do that. They knew, and didn't have to wait. I think we owe the same to the families of the Aurors — and even the prisoners." Harry saw that Snape's mouth was drawn into a surly line. *Does he think I'm being arrogant, like my father?* Harry wondered.

Dumbledore, however, bowed his head to him. "I'd like to hear what you have to say, Harry."

"Well — everyone in this room knows about my other life. And Ginny knows too —"

"Speaking of Ginny, where is she?" Ron said suddenly, interrupting.

"I needed to ask Miss Weasley to tend to my third-year Slytherins and Gryffindors", Snape said archly. "She is a prefect, and that is one of the functions of a prefect." He nodded at Harry, a silent way of urging him on. *Okay*, he thought; *maybe Snape won't shoot me down after all*.

"So, everyone here knows that I broke out of Azkaban, right? It seems to me that Sirius and I are the only people who haven't been kissed by a dementor who've done this, as far as we know. We know what it's like in there and we're also both Animagi, so we can move about the island in our animal forms and be less affected by the dementors than when in our human forms — if there *are* any left there. Hermione being an Animagus also makes her a good person for this mission. Plus, in our Animagi forms, we're all three fairly large animals and can fight in our animal forms if need be — again, if there's anyone to fight."

"So *you* think the Death Eaters who were taken to Azkaban are still there, Harry?" Hermione asked him, looking both a little nervous and hopeful.

He shrugged. "It's one possibility, that they're lying in wait, hoping that there will be a rescue attempt and that they can ambush whoever comes. I reckon that's one reason the Ministry doesn't want to go in yet, for fear of an ambush. But if we go in *expecting* to be ambushed — we'll be one step ahead of them. Plus, they'll probably be expecting anyone who comes to use the usual approach — the small boats with prisoners go into this grotto, and there's a long stair that leads up to the fortress proper. We won't take that route. We'll come in from the top."

Snape cut in now. "That's impossible. There are charms on the fortress that not only make Apparition impossible, as it is impossible here at Hogwarts, there are also anti-broomstick charms. Or rather, any object that has been enchanted to fly will be rebuffed once it gets close to the island. Flying charms do not work around Azkaban."

Sirius nodded in agreement. "That's right. It doesn't matter — broom, *motorcycle* —" he said, smirking at Dumbledore, who had a small smile.

"*Flying car*," Hermione said, looking smugly at Ron and Harry.

"Yeah, but *animals* that can fly — like owls — can get there", Harry said.

"Well, yeah", Sirius said. "But we can't ride owls to Azkaban."

"No, I didn't mean that. I meant — a winged *creature* can get through. That's how I escaped, after all."

Hermione's face lit up. "Of course! Flying in your griffin form!"

He grinned at her. "Right! None of us could fly a broom onto the island — but a golden griffin could fly there."

Sirius' eyes lit up. "And so could a hippogriff." Harry wondered where Buckbeak was now.

"I don't know, Harry. I still can't believe you flew to the coast from Azkaban. When I was swimming, that distance, in my dog form, I almost drowned. It probably didn't help that the current took me pretty far south, almost to the Firth of Forth. After I reached the mainland, I was taken in by the crew of a trawler, thank goodness. They nursed me back to health — well, healthier than I'd been, at any rate — and happened to be heading south, to London, so I was able to escape from them and check on you in Surrey before heading north again to Hogwarts. I would never have

managed the overland trip if I hadn't been able to recover from the swim while I was living on the trawler."

Snape's lip curled. "I have to agree", he said, as though it was very distasteful for him to agree with Sirius. "It's too far. You told me yourself, Harry, that you were exhausted from flying to the mainland. You'd have the same problem flying in the opposite direction, and so would any hippogriff, especially if carrying a passenger. So, you'd exhaust yourself flying there, collapse, and, if they're still there, promptly be attacked by Death Eaters."

Harry grinned at him. "No I wouldn't. That's where you come in. We'd need make sure we're flying a shorter distance — preferably from the deck of a good yacht. We'll need to rent something somewhere along the coast, not too far away. Probably Peterhead or Inveralochy rather than Fraserburgh, especially this time of year, when many of the best might be in dry-dock. And if we do that — we'll need an experienced sailor to be captain", he added, looking meaningfully at Snape.

Snape raised one eyebrow. "Yes, but a captain needs a crew —"

"I served as your first mate many times on the *Patricia*", Harry told him, "and didn't you teach Maggie to sail, years ago? Plus, there's always Uncle Duncan, too. I mean — Professor MacDermid."

Snape looked like he was considering all this, his chin in his hand as he stared past Harry at the flames. "Yes, yes. It's possible... but if we are to have a vessel tomorrow, I will need to leave now, which means I will not be able to teach for the rest of the day."

"I think that, for once, we can afford to give the students a small holiday from their Potions lessons, disappointed though they will be", Dumbledore said to Snape; Harry saw the twinkle in his eye and only just managed to refrain from laughing. "And while, in many respects, this sounds like an excellent plan, Harry, there is still one problem: while dementors cannot see, and so did not detect you or Sirius leaving the prison, Death Eaters *can* see, and if they have not all fled from the fortress but are in fact lying in wait, they would very likely notice a yacht moored close by, even if they were primarily looking for small boats to come into the grotto, as you mentioned, rather than hippogriffs and a golden griffin landing on the upper bluffs. For that reason, I think that I should also join this little excursion", he added, to Harry's surprise, but also relief. Then Harry frowned in confusion.

"How will you prevent them from seeing us?" he asked the headmaster.

Dumbledore gave him a cryptic smile. "You shall see, you shall see, Harry. But *they* shall not", he added, putting one finger alongside his nose in a conspiratorial manner and smiling slyly. "I think that we will also not 'invade' the prison in one fell swoop. We cannot afford to take many people, as we will need space in the vessel to remove the Aurors." Harry looked surreptitiously at Ron; Dumbledore didn't say *the Aurors' bodies*. "That is seventy-five people to rescue. If we take a large contingent, it will be difficult to accomplish our goal. So — first, we need to find out whether a battle even needs to be fought. If we need assistance, we shall have the operatives standing by to provide it. If not — we can simply begin to coordinate the rescue operation. So — Harry, you will need to do reconnaissance first, to see what is what. Your talent for conjuring a strong Patronus could be quite useful, in the event that any dementors are still on the island... I shall speak to Hagrid about acquiring some hippogriffs quickly, and I shall speak to the other operatives about standing by. And I will come with you, Severus, to acquire a vessel."

Snape nodded at the headmaster. "Yes, sir."

Ron made a face. "But what if you can't get the kind of boat you want? Or someone has it but won't let you use it? And who's to say you'll know how to use whatever kind of boat it is?" He sighed. "I'm not trying to derail my own brother being rescued, but I'd feel a lot better if you were going to be sailing your own boat. I mean, you probably know that like the back of your hand, and Harry and your uncle, as well", he said to Snape, surprising Harry. Ron usually only spoke to Snape to complain about something. Ron sighed. "But I reckon you can't just shrink down the *Patricia* and put it in your pocket, then Apparate to the coast with it..." he trailed off wistfully.

Dumbledore laughed heartily suddenly. "Well, it is true, Mr. Weasley, that *you* could not do that. Especially if you do not bring up your Transfiguration marks. Professor McGonagall was just telling me about your performance the other day, in fact. You're only the third-best Transfiguration student in your year", he added, his eyes twinkling at Ron, whose mouth had dropped open.

"Third? You're joking! I never thought I was that —" Then he looked perplexed. "But then who are one and two —" However, he hadn't gone

very far with this line of inquiry before a glare from Hermione told him the probable answer. Dumbledore chuckled again.

"Need I remind you that your two best friends *are* both Animagi? And while it is quite true that *you* could not Transfigure Professor Snape's vessel into something small enough to carry in your pocket, and neither could anyone else here, *I* can."

Harry laughed. "You! I should have known!"

Dumbledore nodded at him. "Yes, you should have. I did, after all, teach Professor McGonagall everything she knows of Transfiguration and was the Transfiguration professor for many years before becoming headmaster. So! That was an excellent idea you had, Mr. Weasley. Despite my having the ability to do that particular Transfiguration, it nonetheless had not occurred to me, and so again we all benefit from your keen — if irreverent — approach to problem solving. Ten points to Gryffindor!" he declared, beaming at Ron, whose ears were quite red now. Hermione was beaming at him.

"It *would* be preferable to have the *Patricia*..." Snape admitted grudgingly, raising his eyebrows at Ron. Harry smiled up at him.

"She's a yare ship, sir", he said to Snape.

He nodded at Harry, looking as though he were trying not to smile.

"Aye, that she is, Harry." He turned to Dumbledore. "In that case, we should go to the village and Apparate to Dunoon immediately, headmaster", Snape said, sounding grim.

"I agree. However, first I will need to contact a certain person I know in Magical Transportation to get a Portkey to the coast on short notice. Where did you say you landed when you escaped from prison, Harry?"

"Fraserburgh."

"Hm... And how did you avoid being seen? A golden griffin doesn't set down on the northeast Scottish coast every day."

"Well, apart from the fact that I landed well before dawn — there weren't even any fishermen out and about — I landed on the roof of the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses. It's a former castle, quite large and high, near the beach, with a modern lighthouse nearby, which is the one they actually use now. The parapets would keep anyone from seeing us if we landed on the roof with a Portkey, especially very early."

Dumbledore nodded. "Very good, very good. Now, I think the only member of our party we are missing is Madam Pomfrey, should we need

someone with us who can give medical attention to those we find, and possibly to members of our own party."

Harry bit his lip. "Um, well — see, she's probably on her way to Hog's End to deliver George and Angelina's babies. When we called Hog's End in Professor Snape's office, Fred said he was about to call her to do the midwifing..."

Dumbledore nodded. "Ah, I see. New Weasleys! Isn't that nice. Well then, we shall have to make certain that we all read up a bit on our first-aid charms before we depart..."

"What about a doctor from St. Mungo's?" Ron said quickly.

Dumbledore looked at him inquisitively. "Who did you have in mind?"

Ron looked sheepish. "Dr. Anderssen. We're sort of friends now. Although, come to think of it —" Ron swallowed. "After what we found at the dragon reservation, maybe she wouldn't want to risk seeing anything like that again —" Ron swallowed, and Harry wondered now whether Percy and Katie had been cut down as ruthlessly as the people on the reservation.

The headmaster nodded. "That was truly dreadful, yes. But those people had no way to defend themselves from such an attack, and indeed, were not even expecting one. I expect that seventy-five Aurors would not be so easy to overcome."

Unless they're only arriving three at a time and being picked off as they come up those long, winding stairs, Harry thought grimly.

"But if she would be *willing* to come —"

"No", Hermione said suddenly. "We don't know that we can trust her." Harry remembered that Ron had said he'd told Hermione about Nita; what he hadn't told Harry was her reaction to that. Harry felt like he was no longer in the dark about this.

Ron frowned at her. "Hermione, I told you —"

"Yes, and I'm not so sure you should believe that she's your friend until she shows some other signs of being truly disenchanted with the Malfoys, other than calling Draco Malfoy disloyal because he put his dad in prison. Her beloved uncle is in Azkaban — I *hope*. When we first met her at St. Mungo's, frankly, she didn't really strike me as someone who was on our side in all this. She hates most Weasleys. Even though she claims she's not getting on with her aunt now, she did give her a place to live when she lost her home. I think that we should contact St. Mungo's after the fact if we

need them to come get anyone for treatment, but asking Nita Anderssen to come along is a *very* bad idea."

Ron looked sulky, as though she would get a piece of his mind later about this. Dumbledore shrugged. "If there is some question — it is probably wiser to err on the side of caution. Draco Malfoy's cousin, eh? I do not recall a Nita Anderssen coming to Hogwarts..."

"She went to Durmstrang. Her mum works for the Swedish Ministry of Magic. She's the one who organizes the annual broom race", Ron told him.

"Ah, ah, that would explain it —"

"Yes!" Hermione said. "That's another thing. She went to Durmstrang, where she probably learned Dark Arts from day one. I just think — considering how sensitive this is, bringing in someone whose loyalty can't be guaranteed isn't a good idea —"

Dumbledore nodded at her. "Well, in that we do not know for certain whether we will need a doctor on board, we may merely be wasting Dr. Anderssen's time, when she might be far more needed at St. Mungo's." He gave Ron a look that said this part of the conversation was over, and Ron grimaced, his mouth in a line, as he gave the headmaster a small nod.

They all stood, and to his surprise, the headmaster grasped Harry's hand. Giving Harry an ironic smile, he said, "I knew there was a reason for you to be a golden griffin Animagus, Harry."

Harry grinned at him. "Yeah, when I was in my other life, I did, too. Only, there, I thought it was so I could break out of Azkaban. Turns out it's so I can break *in*."

* * *

Harry felt very jumpy after that, having to sit through History of Magic, fighting against the urge to just change into a griffin *now* and fly to the coast, in full view of the wizarding and Muggle worlds alike. As he doodled idly in the margins of his parchment, listening but not really listening to Professor Binns drone on and on, he remembered his own stay in Azkaban, and he hadn't even realized he'd been singing *He is an Englishman* under his breath until Ron put an elbow in his ribs. Harry looked up, swallowing; the entire class, including Professor Binns, was staring at him, and the Slytherins in particular were sniggering openly. (The Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were at least doing it behind their hands, and although most of the other Gryffindors seemed to be trying to pretend they didn't want to laugh, Harry could tell it was difficult for them.) Draco

Malfoy was laughing the loudest and elbowing Crabbe and Goyle good-naturedly, as they also clutched their stomachs, laughing.

"Would you care to give us all a little concert, Mr. Potter?" Binns said icily, sending an extra blast of cold air toward Harry as the laughter of the Slytherins continued. "At this moment I am not certain that it *is* greatly to your credit that *you* are an Englishman", he added, making almost all of the other students roar now. He actually looked rather pleased with himself for producing this response. (Laughter was *never* heard in Binns' lessons. Snoring yes; laughter, no.) Harry almost longed for the days when the ghostly professor didn't know his name.

Ron and Hermione eyed him with sympathy. Harry wanted to sink beneath his desk and disappear; it seemed that the time to leave for Fraserburgh was eons away, and in the meantime, going through the motions of being a typical seventh-year student was likely to drive him mad.

"Sorry, sir", he said softly, after the laughter had died down.

Binns continued droning, as before, and the class once more sank into its usual torpor. When the bell rang for lunch, Harry jerked his head up; he'd fallen asleep, his chin in his hand, and he'd been having a very vivid dream. He was in his other life again, not in Azkaban, this time, but in the Great Hall, sitting at the Slytherin table, about to begin a meal. The Bloody Baron was zooming right at him, and Harry thought he was going to tell him to fix the timelines, as he had done on the first day of the autumn term of his sixth year, in his other life. Instead, in his dream, the Baron, the Fat Friar, the Grey Lady and Nearly Headless Nick formed a macabre sort of chorus line, their arms around each other, kicking up their heels, while singing lustily:

*When a felon's not engaged in his employment
(his employment)
or maturing his felonious little plans
(little plans)
his capacity for innocent enjoyment
(`cent enjoyment)
is just as great as any honest man's*

(honest man's).

Meanwhile, Peeves was zooming around them in a dizzying display of poltergeist aeronautics, his grating voice singing a completely non-harmonious counter-melody while unseen violins played a warped-sounding accompaniment:

*I'm called little Buttercup, dear little Buttercup,
though I could never tell why.
But still I'm called Buttercup, poor little Buttercup,
sweet little Buttercup, I.*

But Harry realized that he was no longer hearing the poltergeist's voice. It was now a wavering falsetto...

Buttercup.

Harry shook himself, picking up his parchment and quills and putting them in his bag, following Ron and Hermione down to the Great Hall in a bit of a fog. He remembered hearing Roger's cousin sing at the wedding, in August, and wondered again what he'd done in the other world to end up in Azkaban. *Maybe he was framed*, Harry thought, but then he remembered that in both worlds, Roger Davies had been a Death Eater. Unfortunately, the only other beings in *this* world who knew about the other one were the ghosts, and they very likely wouldn't know about a lone wizard and the particular reasons for his going to prison. Unless —

He'd never had a conversation with the Grey Lady of Ravenclaw — only greeted her politely every now and then, when the occasion arose. But now he thought — maybe Roger and Evan had been in school when their cousin had gone to Azkaban? Maybe there was some sort of scandal in Ravenclaw, as a result? It might be worth a try to ask her. And it would give him something else to think about before the trip up north.

He went to the Great Hall with the other students, swept along by the crowds and led by the hand by Hermione now and then, when he started to

fall behind, but not really paying attention to what was going on around him. When he sat at the Gryffindor table, he noticed the Ravenclaw ghost sitting at that table, having a conversation with Mandy Brocklehurst and some other seventh years. After he'd eaten mechanically, not even taking notice of what he'd chosen, he rose and walked toward the Ravenclaw table without saying anything to Ron, Hermione or Ginny.

Harry approached the Grey Lady and said, "Excuse me for interrupting", nodding at both the ghost and Mandy. "Could I borrow her for a few minutes? There's something I need to ask her in private."

The Ravenclaws looked surprised, and Padma Patil's mouth was twisting unpleasantly.

"Come to ask her for voice lessons?" she said. "You didn't sound *that* bad." The other Ravenclaws started laughing, but Harry ignored them, and to his relief, so did the Grey Lady.

"I will come with you", she said in a mellifluous voice, wafting after Harry as he left the Great Hall. He looked over his shoulder and found that Hermione, Ron and Ginny looked perplexed; he would tell them later what he was up to.

"Hello", he said to the dignified ghost a bit uncertainly. "I reckon I should introduce myself. I'm —"

"I know who you are", the Grey Lady said, smiling indulgently at him. "What is it you would like to know?"

"It's — it's something about my other life."

She frowned. "That world was never meant to be —"

"I know, I know. And I fixed it. But — but there are loads of things I don't understand about it. Like when I was in Azkaban", he said, dropping his voice lest anyone should hear him, "there was another prisoner whose cell was near mine. He was Roger Davies' cousin, and since Roger was a Ravenclaw, I reckon his cousin was too, when he was in school. I was hoping you might know something about why he went to prison in that world. He's not in prison in this life, and this has been bothering me for a while, especially now that there's this trouble at the prison..."

She shook her head sadly. "No cousin of Roger Davies was in Ravenclaw", she said sadly.

Harry grimaced, unsure how else to find out what he needed to know. "Are you sure? Think — his name was Geoff. I just met him last summer."

She nodded her head now. "I think I know the one you mean. But still — he was not in Ravenclaw. When he was here at the school, he was in Hufflepuff."

Harry stared. "Hufflepuff? A Hufflepuff went to prison? That just seems — wrong. I mean, how could someone whom the Sorting Hat would put into Hufflepuff end up in prison? How could someone be surrounded by all of that hard-work and loyalty for seven years and break the law?"

She shook her head. "Do you not think many Death Eaters are hardworking? And they are certainly loyal to their Master. Hard work and loyalty are as easily used for ill as ambition or bravery or a desire for knowledge." Her voice seemed to come from a far distance. He swallowed, digesting what she'd said. "And I did not say that he spent seven years in Hufflepuff."

Harry widened his eyes. "Did he — did he do something to get himself expelled *and* go to prison, before he was even out of school? A *Hufflepuff*?" Harry still couldn't quite picture a dark wizard who was a Hufflepuff.

"No; it was quite simple, really. He was asked to leave because he was a Squib", she said carelessly. "It was quite the scandal that he'd been admitted at all..."

"A *Squib*!" Harry squeaked, before getting control of his voice again.

"Yes, a Squib", she said, completely unperturbed.

"Well, that's — that's even *weirder*", he insisted to her. "I mean — why would a *Squib* be at Hogwarts in the first place, let alone in a wizarding prison?"

She gave a small, ghostly shrug. "That I cannot tell you. In that other world, I did not even learn of Mr. Filch leaving the school until after he was gone. I do not recall having heard why the Squibs disappeared."

Harry drew his lips into a line. "Okay. Thanks. You've actually been quite helpful." She nodded to him and drifted through a wall, just as the bell rang for the afternoon lessons.

He merely went through the motions of attending Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures that afternoon, and when he was back in the common room at the end of the day, Ron, Hermione and Ginny tried pumping him for information about the Grey Lady, but he refused to talk. Finally, after just gazing at him pleadingly for some minutes without saying a word, Ginny broke him. (*How did she do that?* he wondered.)

"All right, all right. You have to promise to keep this quiet", he said, relenting, leaning close to the other three. They sat in their usual spots near the fire, and Harry looked around the side of his chair before saying anything; the other Gryffindor students seemed to be involved with their own lives and paying no attention to the four of them. "I was asking her about Roger Davies' cousin, Geoff", he whispered to them. "The bloke who sang at the wedding last summer. I was hoping she might know why he was in Azkaban in my other life."

"Why'd you want to know that?" Ron asked, shrugging.

Harry grimaced. "I've been thinking a lot about that, what with our planning to leave for Azkaban in the morning. Or rather, before morning. He's the cousin of someone we know is a Death Eater, and he was in prison in that other world. I know, I was too, but I'm wondering whether he had anything to do with framing Mr. Spinnet. After all, if Roger was doing what he was doing to protect his family — well, his cousin's part of that family and might have been convinced to help. Roger convinced Alicia to help."

"So — if that's what's happened, where is Roger?" Hermione wanted to know.

Ginny opened her eyes wide. "Maybe his cousin double-crossed him?"

Harry shook his head. "I was just trying to find out, for a start, whether the Grey Lady knew why he'd gone to prison before, in case there was a fuss about it in Ravenclaw, because of a former member of that house being arrested and all that. But it turns out — he wasn't in Ravenclaw. He was in Hufflepuff. Except he shouldn't have been."

Ron frowned. "Why not? The Sorting Hat doesn't make mistakes, does it?"

"According to the Grey Lady, Roger's cousin was in Hufflepuff, but he shouldn't have been at Hogwarts at all. He was a Squib, and when he was found out, he was expelled."

The three of them gasped.

"Expelled!" Ron choked out. "Wow! A Squib gets in, but then gets expelled. I wonder why all of that happened?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know, but I mean to ask Dumbledore. He would have had the final say in whether he was expelled, I should think. I just wish there was someone else I could ask about why he might have gone to prison..."

Hermione looked at him with her arms crossed. "You're forgetting one of the nosiest parkers we've ever had the displeasure to meet here at Hogwarts."

Harry frowned. "I am? What are you getting at?"

Ron's eyebrows had flown up. "Nosy parker? Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Hermione nodded. "Precisely."

"What?" Harry demanded. "Could the pair of you stop talking in code for thirty seconds?"

Ginny looked at him with her brows raised now. "Harry — they're obviously talking about Moaning Myrtle."

Harry stared at her. "Moaning Myrtle? How do you know about Moanin — " But then he remembered that Ginny had thrown the diary through Myrtle in her first year, when she was frightened of continuing to write in it. And when the toilet backed up and Myrtle flooded the bathroom and corridor outside, Harry had found the small black book...

"What makes you think Myrtle would know anything?" he asked them.

Hermione shrugged. "As I said — nosy parker. Roger's cousin was a Squib, and he was in Azkaban. Filch is a Squib, and he presumably disappeared with the others. What if they were *all* sent to Azkaban? Myrtle probably would have found a way to spy on Filch being taken away, I'm guessing. That would be rather juicy."

Harry nodded. "Could be. All right, good idea. I'll go see her, when we get back."

"Don't you mean *we'll* go see her?" Hermione said.

"Well, erm, I think I'll go alone."

The three looked at each other and then Harry. "Why?" Ron wanted to know.

He drew his lips into a line. "I just think I'll get further with her is all."

Hermione nodded with understanding. "Ah, yes. Without me and Ginny. Don't want to make her jealous."

Harry felt himself flush. "Well, no, not precisely —"

Ron laughed. "Yes, precisely. You know she's fancied you since our second year, and you want to take advantage of that, make her think you came to visit her special before you pump her for information. Good job, Harry. Yeah, you're right, we shouldn't go."

"Fancies him!" Ginny said, looking indignant.

"Um", Harry began, "well, maybe she did at one time. When I was using the prefects' bathroom to work out the clue for the second task of the Tournament, using that screeching egg, she was in that bathroom, too. Not at first — she showed up after a little while, although I'm not so sure she wasn't spying on me from the faucet, before I got in the tub. And she said she'd seen Cedric in there, too."

Ginny giggled a little. "So — she likes spying on the boys, does she?"

Harry shrugged. "I reckon she hasn't stopped. Not that I gave her much to spy on when I was a fourth year..."

Ginny turned beet red and murmured, "I always thought you looked quite nice..."

Now it was Harry's turn to redden again; he hoped Ron would ignore Ginny's comment. "Anyway, I don't think she feels quite the same about me anymore, so I need to be careful about what I say. She was rather cross with me for fixing the timelines. I talked with her last year, and she told me how much she enjoyed herself in that other world. Loads of other miserable people. She was in her element."

"It's just as well if she's over you", Ron said. "After all, what if she was finally successful in getting you to fall for her? My sister would be heartbroken —" he said with a melodramatic sob in his voice, abruptly cut off when Ginny hurled a cushion at his head. He caught it easily, laughing.

Harry was laughing too, but then he noticed that Hermione was staring at the fire, her eyes narrowed in thought. "Yes, Harry", she said, as though answering a question. "Talk to her about how happy she was in that world. Lead her to talking about the Squibs, find out whether she was about when Filch disappeared, or whatever happened to him. If there was misery involved, she'll just *revel* in telling about it."

Harry nodded. "I have to agree. She'll probably be positively gloating."

"Well, speaking of being miserable, when you were talking to the Grey Lady, Sirius came to the Gryffindor table at lunch and told us that Remus has been detained by the Ministry. They're questioning him."

Harry swallowed. "Erm, I hate to ask, but what are their interrogation methods like?"

Ron shrugged. "Well, they don't use Veritaserum as a matter of course, as it's not considered completely trustworthy. After all, if Voldemort had a mole in the Ministry, the mole could say he was giving a suspect Veritaserum, and then slip in something that makes the suspect say the

exact *opposite* of the truth every time he's asked a question. Then they'd have a real mess on their hands."

Harry nodded. "So — we've got our work cut out for us on this trip. On top of everything else, we have to clear Remus' name. Hopefully, we'll find out something at Azkaban that will make it plain that he had nothing to do with this."

"We should get some sleep", Hermione said, after yawning hugely. "We need to leave at about four-thirty in the morning. I switched our patrol shifts already, Harry, so don't worry about doing the fourth shift. Mariah's taking it for you."

"Yeah", he said, "except I *still* have to get up at the same time. Not much bloody difference."

"I've got the third shift", Ginny said, "so I can see all of you off on your trip. I'll be just finishing up at that time."

Hermione nodded. "Snape has the third shift, like you, Ginny, so he'll probably just want all of us to meet downstairs and go after that."

"Draco Malfoy's on the second shift, so he'll be back in Slytherin House by then, none the wiser", Ginny said, looking relieved. They looked at each other, the four of them; they were very careful what they said around Draco Malfoy now that he'd promised to behave more like a Slytherin. They didn't expect it to stop with tripping Harry in the Great Hall and laughing uproariously when Harry sang Gilbert and Sullivan music in History of Magic.

"That's good", said Ron. "Although — how will we explain our leaving to the other people on patrol, both students and teachers?"

"Well, we'll be leaving with Sirius, Snape and Professor Dumbledore himself, plus Maggie, who's also a part-time teacher. We could say —" She paused, her brow furrowed in thought.

Ginny's face lit up with an idea. "You could say that you're going to Hog's End because Angelina's had the babies! It might even be true by then. Hopefully." She made a face. "I hate to think of her spending much *more* time in labor..."

Harry grinned at her. "That's perfect! All right — cover story in place. Time we all got some sleep. We don't know what we'll find up north."

Ron kissed Hermione on the mouth before going to the boys' stairs, but Harry pecked Ginny on the cheek, feeling self-conscious in front of Ron. He thought at first he was going to have a difficult time dropping off, but

he very quickly drifted off into sleep, seeing in his dreams a fortress rising from cold, dark waters, and a feeling of foreboding hovering over everything...

* * *

At four o'clock, Hermione was shaking Harry awake; he sat up groggily and parted his bed hangings, seeing that she'd already woken Ron, who was getting up slowly, moaning as he went. They'd all been hoping to get some extra rest after the previous three nights, too, when the three of them had been down in the dungeon, because of the full moon. (He and Hermione had insisted that Harry join them and had promised not to attack each other in the morning.) They dressed warmly, wearing comfortable clothes and not bothering with robes. Harry knew that he wouldn't be able to scramble up a mast on the *Patricia* if he was wearing wizarding robes, and if people in Fraserburgh *did* catch sight of them, it would be easier to blend in wearing Muggle clothes. Hermione and Ron were doing the same. Harry Transfigured all of their cloaks to look like pea jackets.

When they exited the portrait hole, they found Sirius waiting for them with Professor McGonagall, Maggie and Ginny. All of them but Maggie — who was also dressed for sailing — were normally scheduled to be on this shift; Sirius wanted to escort Harry, Ron and Hermione down to the entrance hall, so there would be no misunderstandings or delays due to their being caught by the three other patrollers.

When they reached the entrance hall, they found Amelia Tadeo, a sixth-year Slytherin, along with Walter Word and Janet Yeager, both sixth-year Ravenclaws, waiting for the changing of the guard that would take place at four-thirty. So far, Professors Sprout and Vector had shown up to relieve Sirius and Professor McGonagall, but only Jasmine Peters, Albert Rothchild — both Ravenclaw fifth years — and Mariah Kirkner had shown up to relieve the other students. McGonagall squinted at a parchment she withdrew from her robes. "Miss Kirkner — do you know what has become of Mr. Shire? And thank you for taking Mr. Potter's shift, by the way. He has been called away because —" she hesitated, looking nervously at Harry, Ron and Hermione, standing near the large entrance doors with Sirius, Maggie and Ginny. Hermione started to open her mouth, but to Harry's utter surprise, the voice that came out of it was not hers but Severus Snape's.

"— because", said a ringing voice, emerging from the dungeon staircase, "he, Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger, among others, have received special permission to go to Hogsmeade to celebrate a birth. Two births, actually. Mr. Weasley is now an uncle", Snape announced, walking imperiously into the midst of those gathered in the hall. "As it is a rather early hour, Professors Black, Dougherty and I will be escorting them to Hogsmeade." Harry grinned at him; Snape had had exactly the same thought about the alibi. He should have known.

Professor McGonagall looked relieved that Snape had provided the excuse. She looked at him with a small smile. "I would come myself, Severus, but the headmaster has also been called away on business at the Ministry, and I am serving in his stead while he is gone. I expect I shall be able to pay a visit to my former house-members when he returns."

"I expect so, Minerva", he said smoothly.

He started to move toward the door, but McGonagall stopped him. "Oh, Severus — you didn't happen to see Mr. Shire down in the dungeons, did you?"

Snape turned, frowning. "Mr. Shire?"

"Edward Shire, sixth year. Slytherin. He is scheduled to patrol during this shift, but he did not arrive with Miss Kirkner, who is taking Mr. Potter's place."

"I'm taking Eddy's place", a familiar, lazy drawl said from the direction of the dungeon stairs. Draco Malfoy emerged into the light, his prefect's badge gleaming. "Eddy came to wake me — he's got a fever. He reckons he'll go to see Pomfrey in the morning. He's trying to sleep it off first. I told him I'd take his shift."

Harry looked at him with narrowed eyes; was he telling the truth? When did Draco Malfoy start performing acts of altruism?

"Very good, Mr. Malfoy", McGonagall said imperiously, "but Mr. Shire will have to make do with me in the morning. He will not be able to see Madam Pomfrey — she will still be in Hogsmeade until tomorrow evening, very likely." She nodded at Harry, Ron and Hermione. "Mr. Weasley is now an uncle, and she is there attending to his new niece and nephew, not to mention their mother."

Draco looked at Harry with narrowed eyes. "I see", was all he said.

"All right, then!" Professor Sprout said sleepily. "Let's get this new shift started. Professor Vector and I will go up to the second floor, Malfoy,

you and Kirkner take the east wing —"

As the patrollers moved off, Harry saw Malfoy look over his shoulder at them as they opened the heavy front door and prepared to leave. Harry and Ginny hung back.

"Can you — can you give us a minute?" he asked Snape softly. "Just to say —"

Snape nodded silently, and Harry caught Sirius' eye, wondering whether he should have asked him instead. Sirius turned away, and Harry couldn't tell what that meant.

When they were standing in the entrance hall alone, Harry pulled her to him, holding her tightly and burying his face in her hair. "We're going to bring them home, Ginny. I promise", he whispered to her. She nodded and turned her head, meeting his lips with hers, holding his head still with her fingers in his hair.

"Oh ho, what's this, then?" came a familiar voice.

Harry looked up and saw Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner enter the hall; Mariah looked like she might have been trying to prevent Draco from returning. Harry wondered whether Hermione had told Mariah the purpose of her taking his place.

"We're, erm", Harry hesitated.

"You're *what*? Leaving for Hogsmeade to see two new Weasley brats, leaving Ginny behind? Why isn't Ginny going? After all, she's an aunt, but all McGonagall kept saying was that prat you call a best friend is an uncle." He crossed his arms, looking at Harry with narrowed eyes, highly suspicious.

Harry swallowed. *Draco was making a very good point. We really messed this up.*

"What makes you think she isn't coming?" he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

"Well, for starters, no one's said anything about her leaving the castle, and for another, she's not exactly dressed for it, is she? You're wearing Muggle clothes, too. Why would that be?"

Harry and Ginny looked at each other, swallowing. After what felt like an eternity, Harry opened his mouth to answer, but unfortunately, before he could, the door opened behind him, knocking into him and Ginny. It was Snape.

"I think you've both had quite long enough to —" He froze when he saw Draco Malfoy and Mariah Kirkner. "Mr. Malfoy. Miss Kirkner. Ever vigilant, I see", he said, voice dripping with irony. *We're the ones who need to be vigilant around Draco Malfoy*, Harry thought.

"I was just about to tell Malfoy that the reason why Ginny wasn't going to come along this early was because she was expected to want to sleep after her shift. But she's very excited about seeing the babies, so she'd like to come with us now after all. She just needs something warm to wear for the walk to the village —" He took out his wand and waved it at Ginny's robe, which turned into a warm winter coat with rabbit-fur trim at the collar and cuffs. She smiled at him.

"Thank you, Harry. I'm glad I don't have to wait to see my niece and nephew."

Mariah smiled at them uncertainly, looking nervously at Draco out of the corner of her eye. "Bring back photos", she said softly, very quickly. Ginny gave her a small smile.

"Well, we're off!" Harry said a touch too loudly. When they were outside, he heaved a sigh of relief. Ron, however, was surprised and upset at seeing Ginny.

"Ginny! What are you doing here? You're not supposed to be coming!" He turned to Sirius. "Tell me she's *not* coming —"

"Relax, Ron", Harry said quickly. "She's only going as far as Hog's End."

"Hog's End!" said Sirius. "That works out rather well. We were going there anyway, as Dumbledore thought it best to have the Portkey departure point be in the rear garden."

"Okay, that's good. I have to say, though, we didn't think this part through very well. If the rest of us are going to Hog's End to see the babies, certainly it would have made sense for Ginny to come, too. Malfoy came back to the entrance hall and wanted to know why Ginny was staying. Or why she wasn't going. Whatever. He also wanted to know why I was wearing Muggle clothes, but I didn't give him an answer to that."

They all looked at each other nervously. Finally, Sirius said, "We'd best be going. The Portkey takes effect in one hour."

The four of them put their shoulders to the wind and walked toward the village. Ron had his arm around Hermione's shoulder and Harry around Ginny's. It looked to him like Snape wanted to put his arm around Maggie,

but he did not. Sirius walked ahead of them all, shoulders hunched against the cold.

When they reached Hog's End, Ginny let them in, as she knew the password. When they were all in the entrance hall, they were suddenly surprised by Fred leaping down the stairs, grinning ear to ear.

"What's this, then? We weren't expecting visitors already. Angelina's only half done, but so far we have the girl! Little Rowena Weasley has greeted the world!" he declared. "George's upstairs, threatening to hex Madam Pomfrey if she tries to take her away from him one more time. She's just trying to clean her up, but George won't let her go!" he grinned.

Ginny clapped her hands together rapturously. "Oh, what's she look like?"

"Beautiful! Full head of sort of brownish-orange hair, very curly, and skin like coffee with loads of cream. You can tell she's going to be absolutely gorgeous. I think even Angelina's going to have a hard time getting her daughter out of George's clutches!"

He looked energized by the goings-on, and Harry could tell that Ron was reluctant to tell Fred the real reason for the visit.

"Well", Harry said, "actually, only Ginny is here to visit. The rest of us —" he nodded at Ron, Hermione, Snape, Maggie and Sirius, "are getting a Portkey to the coast. We're going to bring back Percy and the others."

Fred froze, looking back and forth at their faces. "Oh, god", he choked. "The Ministry said — they aren't sending anyone. Not yet. I can't believe it. You really are?" Harry nodded. Fred swallowed and looked down at his shoes. "Good", he said, looking up again. "Because — as much as George and I have given him a hard time right from the moment we were born — we *need* to have Percy around to keep us in line, you know? And — and Mum —" Harry had never seen Fred look quite so emotional. Ginny stepped forward and put her hand on his arm. Fred put the arm around her, saying, "He's always been Mum's favorite, in a way. Oh, she loves all of us, we know that. But she and Percy had a sort of — understanding. I think that's why she went off a bit, finding out he'd signed on to train as an Auror without a by-your-leave. If anything happened to Percy — I think Mum would —" He looked very grim. "Well, I don't think she'd be the same..."

Ginny nodded, Fred's arm around her shoulder tightly. She gazed at Harry. "They're going to get him back, Fred. You'll see."

Harry swallowed, not wanting to make her a liar. He bobbed his head at the two of them. "Right, then. How soon does the Portkey take effect, Sirius?"

Sirius checked his watch. "Ten minutes. Fred and Ginny, you'd better stay inside. We don't want either of you caught in our wake. You could wind up halfway across the country."

"I'd like to go up and see little Rowena, anyway", Ginny said softly. She smiled at all of them now, not just Harry, then stepped toward Maggie and put her arms around her. "Good luck", she whispered to her sister. She turned to Ron and he pulled her to him brusquely; Harry could see that his eyes were shining.

"We're bringing him back, Ginny, you'll see", he told her, his jaw looking very tight, as though clenching it were helping him to keep control of his emotions.

Ginny hugged Hermione then, and even Sirius. She utterly surprised Snape by also hugging him, quickly and wordlessly, before turning to Harry. He surprised her by pulling her into the drawing room, calling over his shoulder, "We'll just be a minute!" before closing the door. He just couldn't do what he needed to do in front of the others. He immediately pulled her to him and claimed her mouth, sinking his fingers into her hair and deepening the kiss, feeling her arms snake around him, until she was trembling and he thought it very likely she would fall down if he let go of her. He slowly broke the kiss and pressed his lips to her brow. "Oh, Ginny", he breathed against her skin.

"You're scared", she said simply, whispering. He nodded.

"Going back there — I've tried not to think about it — but it has to be done. We can't leave them there." He framed her face with his hands. "I have something for you. Two somethings, actually." He reached into his shirt sleeve and withdrew Sandy, handing her to Ginny. "I don't dare take her with me. I'll probably have to Apparate at some point." He directed his next words to Sandy. "Sorry Sandy", he hissed at her. "Ginny will take good care of you."

"I know, Harry Potter. Good luck."

He smiled ruefully. "Thanks. I'll probably need it." Then he reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out the silver-colored basilisk amulet, looking at Ginny again. "I know that the last time you wore it you saw me with — someone else. And I didn't want to make you feel violated by

wearing it when we — we were still not quite together. But I want you to have it while I'm away, so you'll know I'm all right." He had already repaired the chain, which she'd broken when she'd pulled it from her neck after seeing him with Mariah. He placed it over her head and moved her hair out of the way so that it could rest on her sternum. She looked down at it, then up at him.

"What if it shows me that — that something dreadful has happened to you?" she whispered.

He put his finger under her chin. "Then you won't have to wait and wonder", he said softly, hoping it didn't come to that.

"Oh, I wish I could come!" she said suddenly, clasping the amulet. "But — but I don't know anything about sailing, like Maggie and Professor Snape and his uncle — and you. I can't Apparate or turn into an animal at will, like you and Hermione and Sirius. And I'm not a werewolf, like Ron, with all of the abilities that that gives him. I'm just about as bloody useless as they come, aren't I?" she sobbed. He held her tightly, rocking her.

"Hardly useless. And you're fabulous at dueling. This is just — yeah, we need people who can do certain things, that's true..." He was at a complete loss, having no idea what he could say to comfort her. He had to settle for kissing her lightly and turning to open the door to the entrance hall. She put her hand on his arm, to stop him.

"Harry, there's something I have to tell you."

"What?" He hoped he wasn't going to miss the Portkey.

"I — I went to see Madam Pomfrey."

He frowned. "So?"

She raised her eyebrows and looked at him with wide eyes. "*I went to see Madam Pomfrey.*"

The meaning of what she was saying finally dawned on him and he pulled her to him in another crushing kiss; he was acutely aware this time of her body being pressed to his under the coat he'd conjured from her robes, and her fingers lightly tracing his neck, the taste of a mint in her mouth that made her breath feel cool, despite the fact that her mouth also felt like an inferno. He had to try very hard to pull away from her, struggling to get his breath. She smiled slyly at him.

"I wanted to give you an incentive to come back", she said, turning quite pink. He grinned ear to ear.

"That's some incentive. Don't worry — I already had every intention of coming back. But now —" He kissed her again quickly, grinning, and finally, they both returned to the hall.

She went to the back door to see them off, along with Fred. Once they were all standing outside in the garden, Sirius took out what looked like a child's spade, for playing in the sand at the seaside. The five others put their hands forward to touch it. Harry looked toward the back door of the house, seeing Ginny framed in the window there, her right hand pressed against the glass and her left clasping the amulet. The last thing Harry saw before he started hurtling through space was Ginny mouthing the words, "*I love you*," at him. Then the hook behind his navel pulled him forward with the others, and Hog's End was gone.

They landed with a thud on the roof of the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses, as he'd recommended. It was just as he remembered, only a bit colder and more wintry, as it was a good month earlier in the year than when he'd escaped from prison. Or was it two months earlier? After getting to his feet, Harry walked to the edge of the roof, staring over the wall at the sea, as he had when he'd flown to this spot from Azkaban less than a year earlier, in his other life. The others were brushing down their clothes and trying to get their bearings. He turned to look at Ron and Hermione, giving them a sad smile. "This was the first place I stood as a free man after escaping", he told them. They tried to smile back at him, but they looked more like they were grimacing; he knew they didn't like to think of him in prison. He turned to see what Maggie, Snape and Sirius were up to.

He stopped smiling very quickly; something was wrong with Maggie. Her eyes had gone vacant and round, and she had collapsed onto the stone deck. She looked past them all at the blank, cloud-covered sky, and when she began to speak, it was in that same odd, deep voice Trelawney had used when she'd told Harry that Peter Pettigrew was going to return to his Master...

*Seekers of the Warriors of Light
Be warned, for sorrow lies ahead.
Some are bound by walls of might,*

Others dwell now with the dead.

*Present in body, not in mind,
Insensate voids still others be.
A new world's vanguard shall you find
Within the fortress on the sea.*

*The Hopeless Ones shall walk the earth
And Happiness this world shall flee
Until the Lion finds their berth
When Night and Day must needs agree.*

Her eyes rolled back in her head and she stiffened completely, so that Sirius and Snape had to catch her to keep her from striking her head. Harry blinked in disbelief. *Another prophecy. Bloody hell.*

He swallowed, looking at Ron and Hermione. "What now?"

"*Ennervate!*" Snape was saying, moving his wand over Maggie, who was sitting up slowly now, her hand on her chest as she tried to catch her breath.

Sirius looked up at Harry. "We have to get off this roof, so we can meet Professor Dumbledore and Duncan MacDermid on the beach", he said, his voice shaking.

"But — but what she said —" Harry stuttered. What *had* she said?

Snape looked at him. "I heard it. I think I remember it. Hang on —" He pulled out his wand, and in a moment had conjured a piece of parchment. He pointed his wand to his own temple and muttered something, then murmured something to the parchment. Harry saw writing appear on it, and when Snape put his wand away, he handed the parchment to Harry. Ron and Hermione leaned in to read it as well.

"*Insensate voids still others be...* Oh, god, do you think that means —" Hermione choked, unable to continue.

Harry nodded, throwing a worried look at Sirius, who would have been an 'insensate void' himself, if Cornelius Fudge had had his way. "It's possible. But what's this last bit mean? *Until the Lion finds their berth / When Night and Day must needs agree.* I thought she said 'birth'."

"So did I", Hermione said. "I don't know what it means."

"You think it means — me? The Lion? Like — like in Trelawney's prophecy?"

"What it means", Snape said tersely, helping Maggie to stand, "is that we are wasting time. We have to meet the headmaster."

Harry frowned. He really wanted to understand what Maggie had just said. She slumped against Snape, still looking a bit weak. Harry hoped she would be able to help on board the *Patricia*.

Ron stepped toward Snape and took his older sister from him. He picked her up easily and leapt up on the wall, then down to the ground; Harry watched him land, bending his knees. It was a leap that could break another man's legs, but Ron treated it like going over a low garden wall. Then he saw Ron take out his wand and cast a spell on Maggie; he didn't know what it was, but she seemed much more chipper afterward. Maybe it was something he learned at St. Mungo's, Harry thought. He looked up at Sirius, who nodded at him; moments later, the four of them had joined Ron and Maggie on the ground next to the Museum by Apparating.

Sirius and Snape walked ahead; Ron walked with his arm around his sister and Harry and Hermione walked side by side, bringing up the rear. Hermione was perusing the parchment with the words Maggie had spoken by the clear, bright illumination coming from the lighthouse.

"*A new world's vanguard shall you find...* A vanguard?" she puzzled.

"Ah, there you all are!" Albus Dumbledore said when they'd gone only a little way; he emerged from around a rather large pile of rocks, where he'd evidently been sitting on the ground. He was holding, very carefully, what looked like a two-foot model of the *Patricia*. Duncan MacDermid was with him, dressed for sailing, and to Harry's surprise, so was Aberforth Dumbledore, whose presence had not been expected. Then, behind Aberforth, another figure emerged.

"Sam!" Harry said in shock.

It was indeed Sam Bell, looking quite pale and anguished in the glow of the lighthouse, his mouth very thin. "Hullo, Harry", he said hoarsely, as though his throat was very tight. "I talked Dick — Aberforth, that is — into letting me come. I — I had to come", he said.

Harry grasped his hand, eyes stinging. "I'm glad you're here", he lied. "Katie will be glad of it, too", he added, hoping he sounded more optimistic about the outcome of their excursion than he felt. Even if she was all right, Katie would probably be appalled by her father's presence.

As it was, Harry was more than a little worried about him joining them. Sam had so very little magic left in him. Ginny could have come at this rate, he thought. With her dueling skills, she would have been more helpful than a distraught father who couldn't do magic.

Dumbledore was the only one among them wearing wizarding robes. Sam, like Aberforth and Duncan MacDermid, was dressed in Muggle clothes for sailing, although Harry wasn't aware of his having any experience at sea. Dumbledore nodded at Sirius now, who took the shrunken ship from him and walked to the edge of the water with it. He placed it in the surf, then abruptly changed into his dog form, wading into the water, nudging the ship forward with his nose. After a little while, Harry could see that Sirius was having to swim while continuing to push the yacht into water that was deep enough; there were buoys indicating the locations of shoals, and Sirius had only just gone beyond them. They didn't want the keel to founder as soon as the ship was enlarged. From what Harry could tell, Sirius had passed a buoy marking three fathoms. Finally, Dumbledore turned to Snape.

"What do you think, Severus?" Harry saw Snape nod, and Dumbledore took out his wand, pointing it toward the ship. Harry realized that he hadn't actually seen Dumbledore do much magic with a wand; he often just clapped his hands or flicked a finger. Now he was concentrating harder than Harry had ever seen him, his jaw clenched and an eerie light in his eyes. Harry didn't hear the incantation, if there was one, but suddenly a smooth stream of light which seemed to be all of the colors of the spectrum at once flew from Dumbledore's wand, and the ship began to bulge and stretch until the full-sized *Patricia* was before them, her masts majestic against the pre-dawn sky, her lovely lines as breathtaking as Harry remembered, the varnished wood and gleaming metal glowing in the beacon from the lighthouse.

Sirius had swum back toward the shore, still in his dog form, to get out of the way during Dumbledore's spell. As soon as the full-sized ship was bobbing in the water, white-tipped waves slapping indignantly against the hull, Sirius swam back toward it and then abruptly changed into his human form just as he reached the rope ladder that had been conveniently left hanging down for just that purpose. They all waited patiently for him to climb up and over the rail, although it seemed to take forever, but then

they saw that he was having difficulty getting the dinghy into the water to bring the rest of them across.

"Why don't I take Maggie over myself, Captain?" Harry said, speaking to Snape, who looked surprised for a moment that Harry was calling him this. "She's the lightest one of the experienced sailors. We can help Sirius. For one thing, he should have let down the anchor first thing; at this rate, she'll be going out with the tide."

Snape looked toward the ship, his face twisting. "Please", was all he said, but his voice was dripping with contempt for Sirius' inexperience.

Harry closed his eyes, feeling the change rush through him, the wrenching, bone-deep pain coming very fast and then dissipating as his paws touched down on the frozen sand. He heard gasps, and looked up, realizing suddenly that neither Sam Bell, Duncan MacDermid nor Aberforth Dumbledore knew he was a golden griffin Animagus. The headmaster explained it to them as Maggie approached him uncertainly and Hermione gave her some pointers for holding on. When Maggie's trouser-clad legs were gripping his sides painfully and her fingers were sunk deep into his mane, the cloth of her pea jacket scratchy against his back, he spread his wings and leapt into the cold air above the beach at Fraserburgh.

He climbed for some minutes, moving past the *Patricia*, then he wheeled against the sky, circling back so that he could spiral down to the clean, scoured deck, where Sirius was still struggling with the dinghy. Sirius hadn't dried himself off yet after his swim, and he was shivering and soaking in the spray that the wind was blowing across the deck, his fingers struggling ineffectually against the swollen ropes. Harry waited for Maggie to climb off him before he transfigured; she was already racing to the anchor. Harry took over the dinghy operation from Sirius, suggesting that he dry himself. Thanks to Maggie, the anchor chain was soon snubbing and the *Patricia* was firmly in place. Harry lowered the dinghy into the cold water and called to Maggie, "I'll row back; you stay here and start checking the sails. This shouldn't take long."

"Aye, it shouldn't", Snape's voice suddenly said behind him. Harry whirled; Snape, Aberforth, Hermione, MacDermid and Dumbledore had Apparated to the ship. Only Ron and Sam still stood on shore. Harry grimaced; he should have known there wouldn't have to be multiple trips, as he'd already brought Maggie, and Ron and Sam were the only others

who couldn't Apparate. He scrambled down the same rope ladder Sirius had scrambled up and when he was in the dinghy he put the oars into position and waited while Snape untied the painter and tossed it down to him. The small dinghy bobbed violently in the wintry water, to which Harry was not accustomed; sailing on the Firth of Clyde wasn't exactly the Caribbean, but in the summer, it was a sight warmer than the northeast coast of Scotland in February. He bit his lip instead of crying out the first time the near-freezing water splashed over the transom onto his trousers, and rowed on, determined to be back on the *Patricia's* deck as soon as possible; he could hardly feel his hands on the oars just moments after starting for shore.

On the way back to the ship, he let Ron row, as Ron pointed out that he could do it faster. Harry didn't argue; he'd felt the strain all across his shoulders on the way to the shore, and he hadn't especially relished walking through the freezing shallows to ground the dinghy so Ron and Sam could get in. Harry sat in the stern this time, Sam next to him on the duckboard looking worse than Harry had ever seen him. He remembered Sam telling him about having killed his wife to protect Katie, and going to prison for ten years for it, even though Aberforth had strongly implied that, as an Auror, Sam could have avoided that if he'd really wanted to. Now he was going to find his daughter — the daughter he hadn't seen between the ages of two and twelve because he'd been where she was now — in Azkaban.

Once they were on board, Harry waited for the command to weigh anchor, but instead Snape stood with his hand on the tiller, looking at Dumbledore expectantly. He raised his wand again, that stern glint in his blue eyes as he cried in a slow, ringing voice, "*Navis omnis obscuro!*"

Harry saw the ship, and indeed, all of the people on it (including him) shimmer with a strange rainbow effect briefly. He felt distinctly odd. Then it was gone, and Snape started barking orders, which Harry, Maggie and Duncan MacDermid rushed to obey. When the ship had been returned to its normal size, she'd been facing south, so the first thing they need to do after weighing anchor was to raise the sails and bring her about. Soon the *Patricia* was slicing through the frigid waters of the north, her sails full of the winter wind, on course for the fortress of Azkaban.

Penitentiary

When they had been traveling away from the mainland for so long that Great Britain was a mere line on the horizon and the sky was starting to lighten in the east, Harry looked at Snape's face. He stood alongside Harry, looking straight ahead over the dark water rushing swiftly toward them. His jaw was clenched; Harry could tell he was concerned. "Is there a problem, Captain?" he asked, trying not to let his voice shake.

Snape shook his head. "We'll find it. It may be unplottable, but we'll find it." His jaw was clenched and his dark eyes had that determined look that Harry knew so well.

He drew his lips into a line. "If I may — perhaps some reconnaissance is necessary? We could come to a full stop and let me fly on, try to determine what our heading should be."

Snape looked thoughtful for a moment; Dumbledore was standing nearby, and Snape looked questioningly at him, knowing, as Harry did, that he'd heard their conversation. It didn't appear to Harry that Snape had received an answer, but he nodded at Harry as though he had. Then he gave the order to his uncle, and the anchor crashed down into the deep, which seemed to be *very* deep at this point. Duncan MacDermid stood at his station, waiting, letting out the chain more and still more. Finally, the anchor was firm and the chain was snubbing again, the rocking motion of the deck changing subtly in response. Snape nodded at Harry and he closed his eyes, opening them when the change was complete and his paws had touched down on the deck. Facing aft, he ran forward two steps and leapt into the air, his wings reaching for the east and west horizons. He climbed higher and higher, wheeling around and taking a north course, the frosty air slicing through his lungs painfully as he moved his wings. Soon the waves were far below him and the rising sun set fire to the scudding clouds in the east, off his right wingtip.

He'd never flown in a sky quite like this before and had to try very hard to resist the temptation to just gawp; he reminded himself that he had a job to do and flew on, higher and higher, trying to get the best vantage point to view the sea below him. The whitecaps were very small and thin at this height, and he hoped he wouldn't have a problem finding his way back to

the *Patricia*. The idea was supposed to be to limit his flying by having the ship nearby.

At length, he found that he could no longer see what was below through a thick block of clouds that seemed to go down and down; he looked to his right and tried to gauge the position of the sun relative to his location. Descending in a tight corkscrew, knowing that he might have to pull up quickly to avoid landing in the ice-cold water, he finally broke through the clouds.

Azkaban.

He didn't remember it being shrouded like this. Had the Death Eaters done it? He started to land on a rock outcropping that was very high up, then thought better of that and flew down to a plateau which looked familiar. As soon as he set down, he knew just where he was.

This is where I took off when I escaped.

His heart was in his throat as he turned to face the doorway carved into rock that led to the corridor containing his cell door. As he remembered, there was no door protecting this corridor, as escape was not considered a possibility, usually, and the dementors had no need to be sheltered from the elements. Harry took out his wand, bracing himself for a different kind of cold — the cold that the dementors sent into his very soul when they drew too near to him. He reminded himself that Ginny had been to see Madam Pomfrey and knew that he could probably conjure a very, very strong Patronus with that particular happy thought. Still, the thought of dementors at all was somewhat unnerving to him. It had been a while. Every step seemed to make his heartbeat double.

Inside, it was dark and quiet; even the sound of the sea breaking violently on the rocks receded into a distant whisper. He found the door to his old cell open, and he stood there, staring at the spartan walls and floor, the hard pallet. He hadn't spent very much time there, but it was where he'd been when he read the letter from his stepfather telling him that Ginny and his sister were dead, and that his remaining brother was mad. It was where he'd been when he'd decided once and for all, whatever it took, that he needed to bring *this* world back.

He didn't walk all the way into the cell but backed into the corridor again, trying to see into the dim recesses of the prison, which had never been properly lit because dementors were blind and prisoners didn't deserve to see — and didn't care about it either, after enough time in

Azkaban. He didn't yet feel the cold of the dementors, but he didn't see any prisoners, either. Or Aurors.

As he passed cell after empty cell, doors swinging open, he found himself with the uncontrollable urge again to sing one of Buttercup's songs, to fill the eerie silence. He finally gave in to the impulse, a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

*Things are seldom what they seem,
skim milk masquerades as cream.
Highlows pass as patent leathers,
jackdaws strut in peacock's feathers...*

The noise echoed in the stone corridors in a satisfying way, but although there was no obvious and immediate threat to Harry, he knew that that wasn't really a good thing. He stopped smiling as he thought about this. It meant that the dementors were somewhere else, probably wreaking havoc. It meant that the prisoners were all freed, and he didn't think many of them were like him or Sam or Sirius, basically well-intentioned and not really inclined to a life of crime. And what it meant as far as the Aurors were concerned, he didn't know...

"*Is someone there?*" called a voice when Harry stopped making noise. Harry swallowed, lighting his wand. "*Oh, please, has someone come for us?*" the man's voice called, ending on a choking sob. Harry tried to follow the voice, but it was difficult, as the stone corridors, magically carved from the solid rock of the island, bounced the sound around in confusing ways.

"Say something again!" Harry shouted down the corridor. "I can't tell where you are!"

The man was simply sobbing now, and that was no help. Also, Harry knew he should get back to the *Patricia*, so he could bring the others to help. "Who are you?" Harry hollered now. After a half-minute of continued sobbing, the man gathered himself enough to reply.

"James Edmundson. Jim. An Auror", he added, his voice breaking. Harry swallowed.

"My — my dad's name was James", Harry called to him. "Listen — I'm with some other people. Doing reconnaissance. I need to go back so I can help them get here. Don't worry — we're going to get you all back to the mainland."

But the man's sobbing had resumed, and Harry turned and ran back down the corridor until he was outdoors again. A white light was starting to illumine the cloudy mist surrounding Azkaban as the sun rose higher, and the resulting brightness hurt his eyes. He darkened his wand and put it away before changing back into his griffin form, making a running leap into the mist, moving his wings vigorously until he finally broke through and was flying over the steel-dark sea once more.

He hoped he was flying in the right direction, but when it seemed that he should have seen the Patricia again and didn't, he started to panic. *Don't panic, don't panic*, he instructed himself, trying not to think about the fact that he was in the air high over the North Sea and would need to fly for miles and miles before being able to set down if he had lost track of where the *Patricia* was.

Finally, to his surprise, he saw a speck moving about in the sky far ahead of him. The speck seemed to be moving in deliberate, if erratic, circles. It was oddly shaped for a bird, and behaving even more oddly for a bird, though as Harry drew closer, he realized that there was a very good reason for all of that.

It wasn't a bird, but Sirius riding in circles on Buckbeak. Harry recognized the hippogriff immediately, and wished he was able to speak in his griffin form. Sirius motioned to him to follow, when he saw him, and he turned Buckbeak so that he was spiraling downward very fast. Harry hesitated for only a moment before doing the same, although he was starting to get very nervous as he saw the sea approaching faster and faster...

Almost before he had a chance to brace himself, he saw the deck of the *Patricia* coming up at him, and he was able to land with his legs bent, to avoid injury, but only just. His heart was going a mile a minute, and he immediately changed back into his human form, tempted to kiss the scrubbed decking.

"What — what happened —?"

The others were standing about, looking uncertainly at him. Dumbledore stepped forward and gave him a hand, helping him to his feet. "I'm afraid that was my concealment spell, Harry. Or rather, it is a kind of Transfiguration. My specialty. Something I took great care to keep *off* my Chocolate Frog card is the fact that I am the foremost expert in the world on the Chameleon Transfiguration."

"Chameleon Transfiguration?" Harry said, frowning. "What's that?"

"Transfiguring anything — objects, other people, large ships, even myself — so that they appear to blend in with their surroundings, rendering them invisible, effectively."

Harry dropped his jaw. "*That's* how you did it! It was Transfiguration!"

"Yes. Not an easy art, the Chameleon Transfiguration. It can be very tricky, especially when casting the spell on oneself and if one is planning to move about in a varied terrain. The spell must be cast to constantly adjust the individual's appearance, in accordance with the setting..."

"So — that's why I couldn't see the ship until I was practically crashing through the deck to the galley?" Harry said, laughing.

Dumbledore nodded, smiling. "I thought it best."

"Well", Harry said, trudging toward a coil of rope and using it for an impromptu stool; "I don't think we need it after all. The only person I made contact with was an Auror. The dementors and prisoners seem to be gone. And the Auror didn't sound quite sane, frankly." He nodded at Snape. "I think we should change our heading, captain, so that we're heading north-by-northwest. We've veered a bit too far east. And it will still be hard to find — it's been shrouded in a white mist. But we should come close, and if we don't seem to be finding it, I can do reconnaissance again."

Snape nodded and barked orders to his uncle and Maggie, who obeyed with a crisp, "Aye, aye, captain", from each of them.

Harry went to stand at the prow, looking down at the solid-looking sea parting on either side of the *Patricia's* slim hull. Ron and Hermione came to stand on either side of him, Ron helping Hermione to walk across the deck unsteadily, as she didn't have her sea legs yet. His best friends watched silently, giving him their companionship without making any demands. Ron put his hand on Harry's shoulder as they gazed out over the sea, the cold salt spray stinging their faces, and Hermione put her head against his shoulder as he put his arm around her. Together, they watched the mountain of mist approach that hid the fortress of Azkaban.

They dropped anchor a short distance away, and Dumbledore stepped forward, his wand drawn again. "Well", he said in a businesslike way, "let us reveal our goal." He pointed his wand at the mist and it slowly dissipated, revealing the rocky shape of Azkaban, rising from the cold sea, huge waves breaking whitely on her eastern and western flanks.

Hermione gasped and Ron's grip on Harry's shoulder tightened painfully. Harry swallowed, remembering approaching it in the small boat with the Aurors who'd accompanied him to prison. He turned, wondering whether Sam was all right, but he saw neither Sam nor Aberforth. He turned to Sirius, standing with Dumbledore, petting Buckbeak's flank with a firm hand.

"Where's Sam?" he asked him.

"He and Aberforth are below", Sirius told him. "I forgot that when you worked for him, he was called Dick. Sam keeps calling him that."

Harry nodded and headed for the companionway; opening the hatch carefully, because of the pitching of the ship, he made his way below, where Sam and Aberforth were sitting at a table, having some tea (or at least, Harry assumed it was tea).

"Oh, Dick, I don't know what I'll do if I lose her —" Sam was choking out. Harry didn't have to guess what he was talking about. He cleared his throat.

"We're here. I already found out that the dementors are gone. The prisoners too. It seems that just the Aurors are left. We're going to start getting them out of there."

Sam regarded him with haunted eyes, and Harry had a glimpse of how he must have looked every minute of the ten years he'd spent in Azkaban. Sam nodded silently, his eyes round and his mouth slack, and Aberforth nodded with his mouth pulled into a grim line.

"Why don't you two stay here until we get back with the first group? It will take a number of trips, probably."

The two men nodded at him again, and this time Aberforth spoke quietly, saying simply, "Thank you, Harry."

The slapping of the sea against the hull was louder in the hold than on deck, and Harry climbed back up quickly, glad to be out of the claustrophobic space. When his family had been on the *Patricia* in his other life, usually it had been his mother down below in the galley, and the twins, as well, while he and Jamie and his stepfather and Uncle Duncan

had been above, concerned with the work of sailing. Harry never liked going below if he could help it; he far preferred it on deck. The summer he was thirteen, he'd even slept on the deck instead of one of the berths below.

Dumbledore reversed the Chameleon Transfiguration on the ship, so that they should have no trouble finding their way back, and Harry soon learned that Buckbeak, as well as three other hippogriffs, had been Transfigured into mice, which Dumbledore had been carrying in his pockets. Harry was more and more of the opinion that there was no magical art more useful than Transfiguration, but he didn't dare say this while his Potions Master was standing nearby. When the other hippogriffs had been restored to their usual selves, the deck was a bit crowded; Ron claimed one, Hermione another, and Dumbledore the third. Snape, his uncle and Maggie would stay to manage the ship and Aberforth would continue to keep Sam company belowdecks, as well as tending to rescued Aurors when they began to pour in.

Harry changed into his griffin form again, taking off and pointing his nose for Azkaban. The four hippogriffs took off right after, flanking him, two on a side. The five magical creatures moved their wings against the cold air, on a mission. Harry landed on the plateau first, then quickly changed and moved out of the way for the others to land. Sirius and Buckbeak could communicate without any trouble; a look was all it took, and Dumbledore said something quietly to the other three that had them standing still and to attention while the five of them entered the corridor to begin the search for the Aurors.

Harry briefly showed them his cell; he could see tears in Ron and Hermione's eyes as they glanced around at the dismal little room; Harry thought it possible that his en suite bath at Ascog Castle was bigger. "I heard a man calling to me, but I couldn't tell where he was. I think we're going to have to check each and every cell in the place."

They agreed, and after lighting their wands, began moving more swiftly through the corridors, finally finding the Auror named James Edmundson at the very end, in the last cell before the winding stair leading down to the next level. He wasn't alone, to Harry's surprise, but with another man who sat in the corner, his knees drawn up to his chest, his eyes staring. Edmundson had trouble standing; Ron pulled him to his feet and Harry clasped his hand.

"Hello, Jim", he said awkwardly, not quite knowing what to say to this man who'd sobbed to him earlier. "I told you I was bringing help."

The man looked like he would have collapsed onto the floor again, were it not for Ron supporting him, as he glanced up at Harry's scar. "But — but you're — you're *Harry Potter!*" he breathed, incredulous.

Harry smiled at him, patting him on the shoulder. "And you're going home", he said gently, glad he hadn't told the man who he was before; he might very well have thought he was hallucinating if he heard a voice say, "It's Harry Potter here! I've come to get you out!"

Hermione helped the gibbering man in the corner to stand. His eyes had a vacant look that Harry didn't like. Motioning to him with his head, he asked, "Jim — what happened to your friend?"

Jim Edmundson looked even more grim than he already had, which wasn't easy. "*Elliott was kissed*", he whispered, "and then tossed in here with me."

Harry shook his head; he wished he thought Edmundson could be questioned about what had occurred, but clearly it was too soon. They had to concentrate on getting the Aurors off the island. Sirius and Dumbledore said they were going on, down the stairs, looking for the others. Harry helped Ron get Jim Edmundson back to the plateau, Hermione leading the docile Elliott and trying to explain to him that they were going to ride a hippogriff now. Harry held Ron's steed while Ron helped Edmundson mount him, and Ron climbed up behind without any effort. The animals had been fitted with proper saddles, harnesses and reins, and Ron's mount was worrying at the bit in his mouth. Ron put his feet in the stirrups and picked up the reins now, preparing to take off, while Harry turned to Hermione and her charge so that he could hold their hippogriff for them, as he had for Ron. He was amazed that Hermione hadn't balked at the idea of riding a hippogriff again; she had hated it when she was younger. When she'd mounted hers, back on the ship, he had noticed that her lips were very white and pulled into a thin line.

However, as he turned, Harry saw that Elliott was silently stepping toward the edge of the precipice. Hermione was stroking her hippogriff, whispering reassuringly to it, and Harry didn't realize until it was too late what Elliott was going to do. He simply stepped off into space. Harry gasped, then realized that that was a waste of time; he swiftly changed into a griffin and leaped off the precipice to try to catch him, but it was no

good. If it had been a straight drop down to the water, they were high enough that Harry might have reached him in time, but the surface below was hard, unforgiving rock, rising too quickly, and when Harry reached him and turned him over, Elliott was staring lifelessly up at the winter sky, his neck broken. Harry flew back up to the precipice where Hermione was standing, looking down in horror. When he had changed back to his human form, he took her in his arms, pulling her away from the edge, his own eyes stinging.

"It's no good, Hermione", he whispered to her, feeling her entire body trembling. He knew how impotent she felt, because he felt that way too, just standing there stupidly while a man leapt to his death. "We'll have to take care of retrieving the dead at the end. Our first concern should be for the living", he said softly. She looked at him, her dark eyes full of tears, nodding, knowing he was right. He knew what it was to feel responsible for someone else dying, and he ached to see that she knew what this was like now, too, although he knew, rationally, that it wasn't her fault, that after Elliott had received the dementor's kiss he was already dead, in a way, although his body lived yet. Elliott had simply finished the job the dementors had started.

She looked up at him with glistening eyes. "It's just like Maggie said..." she whispered.

"What?"

"The Prophecy. The one she gave at the lighthouse museum. Ron and I were talking about it while you were off trying to find this place..."

"Ah. I see. What part do you mean?"

"*Insensate voids still others be,*" she whispered, looking over her shoulder in the direction Elliot had gone. Harry put his arm around her shoulder protectively, before she could go diving off the cliff herself. He looked up at Ron, who looked stricken, clearly wanting to comfort Hermione himself, but he knew he had a job to do as well. He nodded at Harry and took off with Edmundson, the hippogriff's wings creating a strong breeze, moving Harry's and Hermione's clothes as though a gale were starting up. Harry managed to get Hermione's mount to calm again; when she had reacted to Elliott jumping, the nervous creature had picked up on her agitation and had started stamping and snorting. It finally seemed that they could leave him, and Harry took Hermione's hand and led

her back into the prison. She came, reluctantly, turning her head to look at the edge of the rock, where Elliott had been only a few minutes before.

That's two, Harry thought. He wondered how many more Aurors had been kissed. He hated to think what Mrs. Weasley would do if one of them was Percy...

He and Hermione found Dumbledore and Sirius on the level below, where there were more than a dozen more Aurors, most of them all right, although they were dehydrated and hadn't eaten in days. Three more of these Aurors had been kissed, two men and one woman, and Harry warned Sirius, "Stun them. We can use the dinghy to get them back, instead of the hippogriffs. We had one upstairs who — who stepped off the cliff..." he choked out, the guilt washing over him again.

Sirius looked horrified, but said, "We'll retrieve the dead later", just as Harry had told Hermione.

Ron had already returned by the time the four of them had helped the Aurors they'd found climb back to the plateau with the hippogriffs. Each of them took one passenger with them, except for Harry, who was his own steed, and so took the two most alert-looking Aurors, both of them clinging to his mane, legs gripping his body, as he took off and beat his wings with all the effort he could muster, moving back toward the *Patricia*.

That's eight, Harry thought when they'd all set down on the deck. Sam had something to do now, taking care of the returned Aurors, who were all led down the companionway. Aberforth took over Ron's hippogriff while Harry helped Ron lower the dinghy into the water again, so he could put his werewolf strength to good use and row to the grotto, bringing back some more people that way.

They were able to bring back nine back on the next trip, as Ron could take three passengers in the dinghy (five people made it ride too low in the choppy water) and nine again after that. They'd retrieved slightly more than one third of the Aurors who'd gone missing, and Harry wanted nothing more than to go to sleep for a month. His body ached all over from doing the Animagus Transfiguration repeatedly and then from the flying, as well. He was also unaccustomed to carrying two passengers at once, both of them adults. As the rescue work continued, Harry understood why they'd remained in the cells — not one of them had a wand. All of the

imprisoned Aurors had been disarmed and their wands were nowhere to be found.

After they'd brought back over fifty Aurors, ten of them people who'd been kissed (Ron had had to stun them and bring them back in the dinghy, then carry each up the ladder, slung over his shoulder), Harry, Ron and Hermione unlocked another cell, on one of the middle levels that they'd just reached going down (Ron had been working his way up from the grotto, so they were reaching the middle levels last).

Harry's heart leapt into his throat; there they were, curled up together on the floor, her head on his chest, his arms around her. They looked very peaceful together; he could see that their chests were rising and falling with their breathing. Suddenly, *he* looked up, seeming very alert, especially compared to many of the others they'd rescued. His blue eyes were the same as Ron's, even behind the spectacles, which had one broken lens.

"Ron!" Percy Weasley cried in disbelief. He shook Katie awake, and she opened her eyes slowly, blinking and rubbing them when she saw the three of them standing there, as though afraid that she was dreaming. Hermione stepped forward and helped her to stand, pulling her into an embrace.

"Oh, you're all right!" she said tearfully; Harry had thought that Hermione wasn't especially fond of Katie after he'd started seeing her during the previous summer, but clearly she was over that now. Ron put out a hand and helped Percy to stand; he looked a little uncertain on his feet as his younger brother embraced him.

Ron grinned at Percy. "Good thing we found you, too. Mum told me not to show my face at home again if I didn't bring you back."

Percy dropped his jaw. "She didn't!"

"No, she didn't", Ron admitted. "But I *felt* like I wouldn't be able to show my face, you know?" He gave his older brother a lopsided grin and Percy gave him a small smile in return.

Even though he didn't know where they were, Harry was glad for a moment that the dementors were gone, as they couldn't take away the relief and happiness he felt at finding them alive and unharmed. "Good to see you, Perce", he said, meaning it, and hugging him quickly.

"Good to see you too, Harry", Percy answered with a nod. Harry turned to Katie then. Hermione stepped back without a word and Harry took her

in his arms, holding her tightly, thinking of what a comfort she was to him the previous summer.

"And you — you may not be my girlfriend anymore, but —"

"I know", she whispered into his neck. She pulled back from him a little. "I don't know when I've been gladder to see anyone in my life."

"Your dad's here, too", he told her quietly. She covered her mouth in horror.

"Here, as in *here*?"

"No — back on the ship, waiting for you."

"Ship?"

Hermione explained about the *Patricia* while Percy told Harry and Ron about how the operation they'd been involved in (taking the twenty-five Death Eaters involved in the Gringotts siege to Azkaban) had gone very wrong. Apparently, Death Eaters who had not been involved in Gringotts had landed on the upper levels of the fortress, flying Swedish Short-Snout dragons, having fitted muzzles over the dragons' mouths and noses to contain the flames. They'd also fitted the enormous beasts with cars that hung below their bodies, so that the dragons were like dirigibles with wings, their passengers flying below instead of above, except for two wizards on each dragon who were doing the driving, as it were. They'd brought ten dragons to the island; five were to take the prisoners away, to a place where they would have the opportunity to throw in their lot with Voldemort; four were to take the dementors, who would probably work for Voldemort with no prompting whatsoever, and one was for the Death Eaters who had come to liberate the prison.

This last group had fought the Aurors who had been bringing the prisoners in the boats. They didn't even try to kill most of them, disarming as many as they could and herding them into cells, locking them in. The ones who avoided being disarmed and fought back even remotely successfully were eventually killed, for the most part. They were massively outnumbered and had been unprepared for fighting in the confined spaces of the corridors and stairs of the prison, whereas that was exactly what the Death Eaters were expecting to do. The ones who fought back had the dementors set on them by the Death Eaters, who locked them up with the other Aurors after they were thus rendered docile. Harry and Ron nodded, not telling Percy about the Auror, Elliott, whose death they'd witnessed. It was during the fighting that some of the Death Eaters had

been killed, too. They nodded again; they'd already found some of the bodies, lying in the corridors, their comrades not bothering to retrieve them.

Katie walked to the corridor and looked up and down it. "What level are we on?" she wanted to know.

"Seventh level down", Hermione told her. Katie nodded. "All right. We need to go down two more."

"We — what?" Ron said, baffled. "I've already done that level." But Harry had a feeling he knew what was going on; he shook his head at Ron and took Katie's hand, putting it in Percy's. He put his hand on her shoulder and nodded.

"Let's go", he said simply.

When they were in the corridor two levels down, Katie started counting under her breath, lightly touching each door as they walked slowly away from the stairs. When she reached the eleventh cell on the right, she stopped and pushed the unlocked door open. She walked to the middle of the cell, turning all around. She looked at Harry. "Do you know where we are, Harry?" He shook his head, because technically it was true, but he had a feeling that he *did* know. It was a slightly larger cell than the one he'd had, because it was meant to be shared; there were two bunk beds with mere wooden planks in lieu of mattresses, showing that it had held four people before the 'liberation'. "This was where he lived for ten years", she said softly, going to a wall under a high, barred window. "See this? It's how he kept track of time."

Etched into the wall so lightly that he had to light his wand to see it were small grids which clearly formed a calendar. Twelve-month cycles, repeated over and over. In December of each year, a day toward the middle of the month was marked, extra deep, and next to it was etched, over and over, *Katie, Katie, Katie*. Harry swallowed.

"Your birthday", Harry said, to which she nodded. "You're what kept him going", he whispered to her.

She shook her head. "Not exactly. He told me about that once. The thing that kept him going, day after day, waiting for the time he would be released, was the thought that I was growing up without him. Which wasn't a happy thought, so the dementors couldn't take it away from him." Harry remembered that Sirius had been able to keep his memory of being innocent because that wasn't a happy thought, either. They all stared at the

makeshift calendar silently, and Harry imagined Sam, year after year, etching the grids and numbers into the wall with whatever small, jagged rock he'd been able to find. He'd certainly had nothing else to do in this place.

Percy broke the silence. "For what it's worth, at least Katie and I ended up together", he said, moving to put his arm around her. She blushed, returning his embrace. Percy looked at the three of them. "I hope the three of you won't be embarrassed by this, but I didn't want to do this until — or if — we were rescued. When we didn't have any hope of that — it didn't seem like the right thing to do. And now — I feel like I'll explode if I wait any longer —"

They frowned, as Percy smiled lovingly at Katie and then slowly went down on one knee before her, causing both her and Hermione to cover their mouths with their hands.

"Katie Bell, I love you with all my heart and all my soul, and I was prepared to die with you here in Azkaban. I thought that nothing could be more fitting than to die in your arms, and with you in mine. Now, instead, we have the chance to *live* in each others' embrace. Would you do me the very great honor of doing that with me, always? Katie Bell, will you marry me?"

Percy's old-fashioned courtly words sounded both odd and just right, and after a moment of shock, Katie broke into tears and went down on her knees with him, throwing her arms around his neck and crying, "Yes, I'll marry you, Percy Weasley!" Hermione's eyes were streaming and she suddenly threw her arms around Ron, who staggered for a moment under her assault, turning deep red, reminding Harry of their third year. Harry just grinned at the embracing pair, on their knees still, and found that he couldn't prevent the laughter bubbling up from inside of him; he hadn't seen it coming at all, and it was the best, the most appropriate thing he could imagine.

His laughter proved infectious, and the others joined him, Percy and Katie getting to their feet again, while Harry kissed her on both cheeks, grinning. "You make every other man in the world look bad, you know, being able to come up with speeches like that, with no planning", he told Percy, laughing.

Ron agreed. "Too right", he said, earning him a playful smack on the arm from Hermione.

"No planning!" Percy said, rolling his eyes. "I've been rehearsing that in my head since we were locked up!"

"Yes", said Ron, with a perfectly straight face. "Because you certainly didn't have anything *else* you could do, locked in a cell with your girlfriend..."

Katie and Percy both turned deep red. "I thought about what to say when she was asleep", Percy mumbled, turning even redder, making Katie laugh.

"And I seem to be making a habit of losing my old girlfriends to Weasleys", Harry added, making Katie laugh even harder. There was another round of back slapping and hugs, and then the five of them went down to the grotto, where Ron had tied up the dinghy, and Harry waved goodbye to them, feeling that something good could come out of this after all. Ron's strong arms moved the oars swiftly, and they disappeared down the winding passage, heading back to the *Patricia*.

As he left, Ron called to Harry, "Find out where that ticking is coming from!"

Harry frowned. "Ticking?" he called back.

"Yeah. I hear ticking. Down here somewhere. Might be someone with a watch. Someone we've missed. Take a look around."

Harry went up to the nearest level where the hippogriffs were tethered, looking for Dumbledore, Aberforth or Sirius. He found Sirius about to take off with another kissed Auror lying across the saddle before him, stunned, and Dumbledore helping to hold the animal still until Sirius was firmly in his seat.

"What is it, Harry?" the headmaster said to him after seeing his face.

"Well, some good news — we found Percy and Katie." He decided to leave it at that for the moment, so that the couple could announce their own engagement, once they were all back on deck. "Ron's rowing them and Hermione back to the ship. But he said he heard ticking down in the grotto. His ears are better than mine. I could use some help figuring out what that is. He thought it might be a watch. I thought — since we haven't found the dead Aurors yet —" they were missing about a dozen Aurors still "— we might check to see whether they're down in the grotto. Someone who was wearing a watch before being killed might be responsible for the ticking noise."

Dumbledore nodded and stepped back from Sirius, whose steed ran forward, spreading his wings and taking to the sky. Aberforth had already left for the ship, and the two remaining hippogriffs stood waiting patiently. One of them had been Hermione's, but Harry reckoned he could fly it back himself, since she'd already left.

Wordlessly, Dumbledore turned toward Harry and together, they went back down the winding stairs to the dank grotto. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Harry started to speak, but Dumbledore stilled him, putting his hand on his arm. Harry watched him close his eyes and tilt his head, listening. When he opened his eyes again, he motioned with his head.

"This way. Mr. Weasley was right. Ticking."

Harry wondered how on earth Dumbledore had heard anything above the sound of water on stone, echoing noisily in the cave and punctuated by very loud dripping sounds. They walked deep into the grotto, the passage winding so that they could no longer see the bottom of the stairs or the entrance to the cave. They walked with their wands lit, held high, and at length, Harry finally started hearing the ticking, too. They turned a corner and found — the dead Aurors. Bodies had been piled there, tossed willy-nilly, with a disrespect that made bile rise to Harry's throat.

With them, they also found something else.

It appeared to be a trunk, but it had been partially sunk into the sand at the water's edge, and embedded in the top was a small clock, which was the origin of the ticking. At least, Harry thought it was a clock. It bore only suns, moons and planets on its twelve hands. Harry felt like he'd seen something like it before, but he couldn't remember where. Dumbledore however, clearly knew what it was, and Harry had never liked an expression less than the one he saw on the headmaster's face now.

"We should leave this place", Dumbledore said, his voice very soft as he looked intently at the trunk. "Now."

"But", Harry began, "the bodies... their families..."

But Dumbledore was already striding away. "Unfortunately, that will not be possible", he called over his shoulder as Harry sped up to stay with him; he had never realized that Dumbledore could move so quickly. When they were again near the mouth of the grotto, they discovered that Ron had already been able to return in the dinghy.

"So", he began, "did you find the bodies?"

Dumbledore nodded grimly. "We found them. Unfortunately, we will not be able to retrieve them, as there was something else, as well."

Ron frowned. "What?"

"A bomb", Dumbledore said simply, climbing into the dinghy, arranging his robes around him.

"A bomb!" Ron said in shock.

"Yes, Mr. Weasley, a bomb. A magical incendiary device. I now believe that the ultimate goal of this — enterprise — was to destroy Azkaban forever, with the captured Aurors trapped here, which is why they didn't risk their own lives to kill more of our people. I believe that it was put on a clock in hopes that rescuers might come and also be killed at the same time. We have retrieved the living. Unfortunately, we shall not be able to do the same for the dead. It is necessary to make haste. There is no telling what effect the device will have on the spells that have been placed on the fortress." Then he lifted his head, as though he was listening intently, and Harry wondered whether it was already too late, and the bomb was about to go off.

"Bloody hell!" he spat, the first time Harry could remember hearing him swear. "Do you hear that, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron nodded ruefully. "Yeah. Come on, Harry", he said, moving toward the stairs again.

"What? Why? I thought we had to go?" Harry was confused, but followed anyway.

"There's someone up here, crying", Ron said shortly, and Harry wondered again how, at his age, Dumbledore could have hearing comparable to Ron's, when most younger people — like him — couldn't hear what Ron could. *Perhaps he put a spell on himself before coming*, Harry thought.

"Thought I'd cleared out all of these cells", Ron said, following the sound. "I know that before I moved up to the next level, I didn't smell anyone else here." Finally, Harry could hear it too. But he was shocked when he saw who it was.

"Cho!"

She sat in a corner of a cell, looking up at him blankly, her dark eyes empty. He wondered whether she'd been kissed by a dementor, but perhaps only a little kiss. A part of her seemed to be gone. *When did she become an Auror?* he wondered. He really didn't know the first thing about what she'd

been up to since the end of his sixth year, when he'd managed to contribute to the death of yet another boyfriend of hers. It seemed that she couldn't stand, but when Ron tried to pick her up, she clung to the leg of a pallet, her grip surprisingly strong. Harry tried to pry her fingers from it, but she just stared at him with wild eyes and continued to hold on.

Finally, Ron got her fingers loose and picked her up easily, as she was so small. The three of them returned to the grotto. Harry looked at his best friend. "Listen — Ron, you row yourself and Dumbledore out of here. Sir", he said to the headmaster, "I'll change to my griffin form, and if you could lash her on securely so she can't fall, I can fly us back to the ship. That way the dinghy will be a little lighter and move faster."

Dumbledore nodded, and when Harry changed into his griffin form, he heard her gasp, despite her otherwise half-witted state. Dumbledore conjured cords to lash her to Harry, then climbed back into the dinghy, which Ron started rowing with lightening speed. Harry ran back up the stairs with her still lashed to him, so they could take off with the advantage of height.

Just as he was approaching the edge of the lowest cliff, he felt the ground beneath him start to shake; he heard a low rumbling and turned, looking up. The walls of the fortress were vibrating very quickly, so that it appeared his vision was blurred, and the hippogriffs that had been left on the upper precipice took off in fright, crying out with those strange noises they made, not neighs and not birds' calls. Cords of green and red light crackled in jagged patterns over the rocks and the fortress walls, and Harry remembered what Dumbledore had said. *The bomb must be disrupting the security spells*, he thought, as the red and green light started to become blindingly bright. Large chunks of rock started to fall from the fortress walls, and he turned to take flight. The shaking and rumbling from the depths of the fortress were growing by the moment. He was launched into the air rather sooner than he'd planned to be as the rock on which he was standing broke away along a line of green light that crackled across it. As he fell, he moved his wings, rising into the air again, hoping they could get clear quickly. He had no thought for anything but flying as fast as he could, and he wished that the *Patricia* was moored farther away, as he worried now about what flying debris could do to her.

Down below, he could see that the swells were dangerously high, water sloshing into the bottom of the dinghy, as Ron, looking very small, rowed

as quickly as he could, leaning into every stroke, giving it all his might. Dumbledore sat opposite him in the stern; Harry hoped he was holding on tightly. Then suddenly, it was as though an unseen hand were pushing Harry through the air, a blast sending something like a strong, hot wind through the atmosphere, emanating from the fortress in all directions.

He continued to move his wings as quickly as he could, and then he saw that the *Patricia* was in danger; the anchor was still down, and the enormous waves that were sweeping across the surface of the deep, because of the tremors emanating from Azkaban, were making her rise up so high that, pulled down by the anchor, she was lying almost on her side, the masts practically horizontal. Harry saw dozens of people on the deck grabbing onto whatever they could to avoid being pitched overboard into that suddenly violent, already near-freezing sea, but he was also quite certain that he heard more than one splash, followed by screaming.

Huge chunks of debris were flying through the air now, smashing into the mizzenmast, and going right through the mainsail when she was almost righted again; more projectiles tangled in the rigging, and Harry realized that he could no longer see Ron and Dumbledore in the choppy waves. It took him a few agonizing minutes to find the dinghy, floating upside down in the turbulent waters, and he wanted to cry out, *Noooo!*

But then a further search revealed a very wet Ron swimming back toward the dinghy with one arm, while his other arm supported Dumbledore, now missing his hat and looking rather bedraggled. They managed to reach the upturned dinghy and hold on, but the subsequent waves from the disintegrating prison created swells that lifted the tiny wooden craft up over and over, while they clung to it tenaciously. Harry had to dodge flying debris and try to work out how to set Cho down on the *Patricia* so he could help Ron and Dumbledore.

Snape had had someone weigh anchor, so that she wouldn't list so violently again, riding the swells instead, but then Harry saw the enormous gash in her side and his heart almost broke. *Our beautiful ship*, he thought tragically, not caring that technically she wasn't his. He saw Severus Snape at his post, valiantly trying to steer her away from the bombed island prison, without a mizzenmast, and with a mainsail that might as well have not been there for all the wind it held now. There were more than a few people bobbing in the cold water, crying out to be rescued, but the ship was being moved farther and farther away from them by the moment.

Harry had a horrifying thought that they might have rescued some of the Aurors only to cause them to die by drowning, or by freezing in the North Sea.

Harry took a chance and carefully set Cho Chang down on a rare clear piece of deck near Snape, then changed back to his human form so he could ask for help getting her separated from him. Maggie ran to help, and as soon as he was free, he didn't take time for talk but changed again, leaping into the air once more, circling overhead, looking for Ron and Dumbledore. He had to fly farther back to find them than he would have liked, but when he reached them, he found to his relief that they hadn't lost hold of the dinghy, although the swells were huge yet and debris was still falling.

He descended and landed on the dinghy itself, feeling it sink into the water a little when he did this. Wave after wave was hitting him, making his wings heavy with salt water. He wished he could talk, and hoped that Ron and Dumbledore would figure out what he wanted them to do. Ron managed to climb onto the upturned dinghy and dragged Dumbledore up with him, helping him onto Harry's back, then climbing on himself just as the dinghy sank beneath their combined weight; Harry shivered as his legs sank into the frigid sea, and did his best to move his waterlogged wings, trying to gain height and get away from the water. A huge wave was swelling again, sending the dinghy flying. It was smashed violently to pieces on a sharp rock thrusting up through the black water, and soon nothing but overlarge splinters were floating in the froth, the only remnants of the craft that had been Ron and Dumbledore's escape from Azkaban.

At last, they were in sight of the *Patricia* again, which was quite some distance from Azkaban now, despite the damage she'd suffered. The sea was still quite violent and the current had been altered by the force of the bomb and the fortress shivering itself to pieces; Harry judged that it was pushing them due south, away from the former prison. He set Ron and Dumbledore down on the deck, then collapsed and became human again, hoping he might find the strength to change into his griffin form again to try to rescue the other people who had fallen overboard.

Hermione stumbled across the deck, still awkward; she fell on Ron, then Harry, hugging and kissing them both in relief, while Aberforth helped his brother to stand, his arm around his shoulders solicitously.

Harry couldn't muster the strength to stand, so he stayed where he was, sitting on the deck, trying to get his breath. "Have to go", he panted. "They — went — overboard —"

"No, Harry!" Hermione cried above the noise of the crashing waves. "You rest! Sirius went on Buckbeak to try to get them. I think they're going to be all right. He's throwing lines to anyone whose head is above water and towing them back." Harry heaved a sigh of relief, feeling for once like the weight of the world wasn't on his shoulders.

Cho Chang was sitting nearby, her eyes blank and staring again, and Harry crawled to her, trying to get her to respond in some way. "Cho! Cho! Please answer me!" he cried, taking her hands in his, feeling like an utter failure despite their having rescued so many people — even Aurors who'd been kissed. He shook all over. He'd always felt Cho was his failure; the fact that he'd contributed to Cedric's death and then Viktor's (after doing his best to get her and Viktor to fall in love, no less) ate at him, and he wondered now whether it was his fault that she had become an Auror, which had led to her current state. "I didn't know you'd become an Auror, Cho", he said softly. "I — I can't picture you doing that. It just seems unlike you —"

"That's because she's *not* an Auror", said a harsh voice nearby. Harry looked up to see Percy and Katie standing there, arms around each other as though they were never going to be parted again. "*She* didn't come with us, taking the Death Eaters to the prison. She came with *them*", Percy said, sending an icy glare at Cho Chang.

Harry gasped; she'd been with the Death Eaters! He didn't know whether she'd joined them before Viktor had died (perhaps she hadn't really been on their side in the fight in the Forbidden Forest?) or after. She still looked at him with vacant eyes. *Well*, he thought, *being with the Death Eaters didn't protect her from the dementors*. The other Death Eaters had evidently abandoned her when they realized that she was damaged enough that she would no longer be any good to Voldemort.

He pulled her left arm toward him and pushed her sleeve up past her elbow. There, on the inside of her forearm, was the Dark Mark. He looked up at her empty eyes, feeling like this was all his fault. "I'm sorry, Cho. So sorry —"

Ron pulled him to his feet, giving her a look of contempt. "Don't waste your time with her, Harry. Snape needs you." Harry looked at him,

stricken. Could no one understand that he felt responsible for her? He looked down at her small huddled figure, rocking herself as she stared into the distance.

As he walked unsteadily toward Snape, Harry heard a cry go up, and he turned momentarily, seeing Sirius land Buckbeak on the aft deck, while a dozen Aurors ran to the rail to help their comrades back up onto the ship. Harry grabbed a bulkhead to keep from falling, as the *Patricia* was still pitching quite violently. He had good sea-legs, but even he was having trouble staying upright in these choppy waters. Now that the rolling was so violent, Hermione was only able to walk by clutching onto parts of the ship which did not move. (She discovered the hard way that a coil of rope isn't necessarily a good thing to hold onto if it isn't actually coiled around *something*.) Ron was relatively steady on his feet, so she usually simply held onto Ron to keep from falling.

Harry reported to Snape, who explained what he needed; Harry and Maggie were the youngest on the crew and would climb the masts to remove the sails, which had just been bent at the end of the previous summer, so they were almost new. Snape wanted them stowed below. "We can't afford for them to take any more damage. Repairing them, even with magic, is going to be quite the job. A wind is kicking up, and the swells are bad enough already. We don't need to be blown onto the shoals. The ship's too heavy with all of these people on it, she's already riding far lower than is safe. My uncle has repaired the hull and the fo'c'sle and is manning the pump for any other water we might take on. Think I can have Weasley collect the sails after you throw them down?"

"Yeah, he'll be fine", Harry told him. "And we should have Hermione, Sirius and Dumbledore transfigure the stunned Aurors. It won't matter to them if they're small animals. That will help with the weight", Harry said. "Maggie and I will take care of the sails." He turned to Ron. "You catch them when we throw them down, and the Captain will tell you how to fold them up."

Maggie had been standing nearby and said, "Aye, Captain", to Snape, quite smartly, as though she wasn't in the habit of sitting on his lap in his office. Harry admired the way she scrambled up a mast like a young boy, and then turned to his own work. It came back to him as though no time had passed at all, pulling himself up, minding the sway of the mast on which he perched. He watched the people on the deck continue to pull the

rescued Aurors back onto the ship, while Snape yelled irritably at Sirius, "Get them below before they go overboard again! And we need your help to lighten the load!" He called for Hermione and Sirius to do as Harry suggested, Transfiguring the stunned Aurors into small animals. As his cold fingers struggled with the ropes, Harry thought he heard Dumbledore offer to help with that as well. Snape, he suspected, had not felt comfortable about the idea of ordering the headmaster to do anything.

Then, as Harry threw the topsail down to Ron, something made him look up. His eyes were drawn to the north, where Azkaban was a smallish lump on the horizon now. Suddenly, what was left of the fortress was blown high into the air, the island breaking up into a multitude of fragments, still crackling with red and green light, and when the air had cleared, a green shape as huge as the former fortress itself was hovering in the air over where it had been, and Harry could see very clearly the shape of it: an enormous skull, with a long snake instead of a tongue protruding from the mouth.

The Dark Mark.

Harry swallowed, shivering as he thought of the bodies of the dead Aurors that would never be retrieved, and thinking also of the fact that if they'd taken even a little while longer to get there, they would have found that gruesome mark in the sky over the former location of the prison and nothing else — no Aurors, living, dead or kissed. Nothing and no one.

Azkaban was no more.

But even as he continued to watch the fragments of rock rain down into the sea, Harry realized suddenly what would follow that last great cataclysm which had utterly shattered the fortress.

"*Batten down the hatches!*" he cried to Snape. "We're going to have to ride out another big one!"

He saw now that Snape had been watching the final blow to Azkaban as well, through his Omnioculars. He slowly lowered the instrument from his face, looking grim, and ordered everyone belowdecks with far more urgency than before; Sirius and Duncan had already been sending people below. Ron was still on deck because he was stowing the sails Harry and Maggie were throwing down, but when he was done he dashed for the hatch, looking up at Harry for a moment and nodding; he was the last one belowdecks. There wasn't time for Harry and Maggie to get down from their perches. Snape quickly took out his wand and produced ropes with it

to lash himself to the tiller. The cold salt spray had completely soaked him now, and his hair clung wetly to his head, making his hawkish nose appear even more prominent. He put his wand away and stood at his post with his feet braced, trying to keep their suddenly fragile-seeming craft on a steady course as far as that was possible. Harry took out his wand briefly too, also conjuring cords to bind him to the mast, and he saw Maggie do the same.

He looked up and saw the enormous wave bearing down on them, larger than any they'd yet seen from the previous explosions. *Ginny*, he thought. *I love you. Never forget that.* It seemed so unfair that, after everything he'd been through, he might die at sea, especially after all of the careful training he'd received when he was young, in his other life. He had also, however, been told repeatedly that the sea didn't play favorites, nor only kill inexperienced sailors. When a ship went down, both old salts and those who didn't yet have their sea legs died.

But the Firth of Clyde had never been like this, and now he thought of the poor Muggle fishermen in their trawlers, who might also find their final resting places in the watery deep because of the destruction of Azkaban. The thought made him choke with anger and grief, tears running down his cold face. Despite the magical cords already binding him to the mast, he wrapped his arms around it, silently telling the *Patricia* how much he loved her and had missed her, tears running down his face. The wave kept coming and coming. Harry's stomach turned over as he anticipated the impact, and yet still he didn't expect it when it came. It took his breath away, the strength of it, the effect of that monstrous force on a mere piece of timber. Creaking in protest, the *Patricia* tilted up and up until she was almost standing on her beams; when Harry looked up, there was the bow, moving inexorably forward, it seemed. He swallowed, clinging tightly to the almost-horizontal mast, both hoping the bindings held and wondering if it was the best idea now to be lashed to the mast, as he waited for the deck to tilt more, to be over his head, waited to be plunged into the merciless sea, tied to a mast pointing down into the churning water.

But just when it seemed that the deck was pointing straight up to the heavens, it began to go down again; the *Patricia* rode on the crest of the wave, up and over, and when she smashed down on the far side, with a report like a thousand simultaneous gunshots, Harry felt the entire ship shudder with the impact as though she might break into a million pieces.

He swallowed, then heaved a sigh of relief, but it was too soon; another wave almost as large as the first lifted up the *Patricia*, but this time she didn't point quite straight up before riding up and over the wave. The impact when she landed on the far side of that watery hill felt no less earth-shattering (or ship-shattering) than the previous one, however, and Harry started to wonder whether after a few more waves like that *Patricia* would be smashing herself to bits.

Wave after wave came, more like the second than the first, but every time, Harry was certain she was going to split her hull in two. At last, he noticed that when a wave picked her up, she was listing a little less, and even landing less violently afterward. They'd ridden out the worst of the waves caused by the bomb. It wasn't smooth sailing yet, but it probably would be soon.

Harry wasn't certain how long he'd been perched on the mast; he untied himself now with shaking, numb fingers; the ropes he'd conjured had rubbed him raw, even through his clothes, and when he reached the deck, he lifted up his jersey and found that he had a deep red welt around his middle.

But there was no time for that now. They unbattened the hatches and people started pouring onto the deck again; Hermione and Ron were among the first on deck; they launched themselves at Harry and threw their arms around him. Everything was happening very quickly, but Harry could have sworn that *both* of them kissed him on the cheeks, and Hermione was weeping.

Finally, he gasped, "*I can't breathe*", from under their crushing embrace; he didn't want to tell them that they were touching the huge welt under his jersey and making it far more painful than it would have been otherwise. They both backed up from him; Hermione was laughing slightly hysterically.

"I — we thought — kept going up —" she sputtered, looking green, then ran for the rail and spewed up whatever was left in her stomach. Harry and Ron followed her, both rubbing her back sympathetically until she was just clutching at the rail, trying to get her breath. She turned around, leaning gratefully on them both, Ron's arm around her. She was a rather ghastly shade of yellow now.

They looked up to see Maggie finally jumping down from her mast, after having extricated herself. She had a desperate look, pushing her way

through the throng that was trying to spill onto the deck now, many of the Aurors running to do what Hermione had just done, the collective sound of retching threatening to make Harry follow suit; he tried to put it out of his mind.

They saw that Maggie had finally reached her goal, throwing her arms around Severus Snape and kissing his face all over. Harry expected Snape to be deeply embarrassed, as when he and Ginny had surprised the two of them in his office, but instead, he looked as desperate as Maggie, his arms tight around her. He did not hesitate for a moment, clearly not caring who might be watching, holding her face up to his and claiming her mouth. Harry felt a smile creep across his face, but then he thought of Ron, and turned to see whether he was going to have a fit. To say that Snape seemed to be glad that she was all right would have been putting it lightly.

To Harry's surprise, Ron was simply gawping at them, his mouth open. He seemed to feel Harry's eyes on him, though, because he turned and met his best friend's gaze, snapping his mouth shut and looking a bit sheepish.

"Is — is that how it looked to you when you saw him kissing your mum?" Ron said, his voice so soft it was a strain for Harry to hear him above the pounding of the waves and the commotion on the deck from the other people. Harry wasn't used to the *Patricia* being so crowded.

"Erm, well —"

Hermione laughed, starting to get some pink into her cheeks again. "He wouldn't know. He refused to look when we were in Snape's Pensieve. I thought *he* was going to spew."

Harry stuck his tongue out at her. "I saw my mum and dad kissing plenty in my other life. Well", he amended, remembering the rift between them that had been filled by Sirius; "when I was younger..."

When Harry saw that Snape and Maggie had ended their kiss, he strode over to them and stood, grinning.

"You brought us through, Captain", he said with a nod.

Snape had never seemed more like his dad as he said, "Don't be a prat, Harry." To his surprise, Snape pulled him into a quick embrace before backing up again. Harry looked at him in amazement.

Then Maggie turned to him, practically jumping up and down with glee. "We did it!" she crowed, also hugging him. After being released, he backed up from her, wincing; they were holding hands now as Snape kept his other hand on the tiller, continuing to keep the course steady, in spite

of the rough waves still pushing them south from the former wizarding prison. Cold spray blew over the rail and Harry shivered, pulling his jacket around himself protectively, wincing again as a twinge of pain went through him.

"Everything all right, Harry?" Snape asked, frowning. He nodded at Harry's middle. "Show me."

Harry reluctantly opened the jacket and lifted his jersey, feeling the fabric stick momentarily to a couple of places where there was blood on the surface. He winced again.

"Oh my god, Harry!" Maggie said in horror.

He dropped his jersey again. "I'll be fine", he said through gritted teeth. He looked up at the bare masts. "Right now I'd say we could use some sails." He looked at Snape, who nodded at him. Ron and Hermione helped them take out the stowed sails again and soon Harry and Maggie were scrambling up and down the masts. When the wind filled the repaired mainsail and the *Patricia* could sail under her own power again, instead of being buffeted about by the sea, Harry felt like the world had almost been set to rights. His middle hurting a bit less now, he leaned on the rail, watching the wake of the ship disappear into the frothy waves. Suddenly, Ron and Hermione appeared at his side.

"We want to talk to you, Harry", Ron whispered urgently. "When you were flying off to find Azkaban —"

"— we were thinking about Maggie's new prophecy", finished Hermione. "And now that we've been there, it seems pretty clear what it all meant."

"Right", Ron agreed as Harry turned to look at them, waiting to hear what they had to say.

"Well?" he prompted them.

Hermione withdrew from her pocket the parchment on which Snape had caused the words of the prophecy to appear. "Well, starting at the top — that's all pretty clear. *Seekers of the Warriors of Light / Be warned, for sorrow lies ahead...*"

"Yeah", Harry agreed. "Hard to argue with that."

She continued, "*Some are bound by walls of might, / Others dwell now with the dead.*"

"Right", Ron said. "Percy and Katie and others were locked up, and others were killed."

Hermione hesitated, then read with a catch in her voice, "*Present in body, not in mind, / Insensate voids still others be...*"

Harry nodded grimly. "The ones who were kissed." The other two also nodded, silently agreeing.

"But this was where we were baffled before going: *A new world's vanguard shall you find / Within the fortress on the sea.* I thought it meant that we were letting you fly right into danger!" she said, her voice squeaking. "I thought — Voldemort's vanguard! That can't be good!"

"And then you came back", Ron added, "saying that they seemed to be gone... so that clearly wasn't it."

Harry turned back to the sea, thinking, watching the hypnotic patterns of the waves. "Read the rest", he said quietly, almost in a trance.

"*The Hopeless Ones shall walk the earth / And Happiness this world shall flee / Until the Lion finds their berth / When Night and Day must needs agree.*"

Harry stared at the waves some more, finally saying, "The Hopeless Ones are the Dementors. That's why Happiness will flee, because they'll be wandering around, kissing people... And the vanguard..." A thought suddenly popped into his mind. He turned and faced the two of them. "The kissed Aurors are the vanguard", he said, suddenly sure of this.

"What?" Ron said, frowning.

But Hermione could also see what Harry meant now. "Oh! They're the vanguard because they're — they're what's coming. More people kissed by dementors. And — and —" she seemed at a loss for how to continue the thought.

"— and people in that state might as well be working for Voldemort", Ron finished in a whisper. "They're certainly useless for fighting him. And like you said — they won't be the last."

"What are you three up to?" Sirius said suddenly, making them all jump. He and Percy and Katie strode over to them.

Harry, Ron and Hermione looked at each other grimly; bringing up the subject of people kissed by dementors didn't seem like such a good idea with Sirius, who'd been in Azkaban for a dozen years, and Percy and Katie, who might have been kissed instead of getting locked up.

"Erm —" Ron started to say, glancing at Harry, waiting for a signal.

Then Harry noticed how grim Sirius looked. Harry glanced back and forth at his face, Percy's and Katie's, frowning. "What?"

Katie said slowly, "It was Lucius Malfoy who locked us in that cell. And he — he said some things —"

Harry willed his heart to go on beating. "*What?*" he breathed.

Percy drew his mouth into a line. "He took the time to torture me a bit first, for taking his fortune from him —"

Katie put her arms around his waist and looked up at him. "He said horrid, horrid things —"

The others waited, and suddenly, it came from Percy in a rush. "He said that I obviously wasn't missing Penelope much." He nodded at Katie. "And he said that he would soon be back where he belonged. He said that he was going to make his son's girlfriend do things for him, to teach him a lesson about betraying his father, and that if Draco behaves himself, he'll forgive him and see to it that his son receives a reward when this is all over. He said —" Percy choked for a moment. He went on in a whisper. "He said that my little sister would be writhing on the ground under his son —"

Percy closed his eyes and shuddered. When he opened them, he was looking at Harry. "Where is she, Harry? Is she all right?"

Harry had difficulty speaking. *Lucius Malfoy was free and out to get the Weasleys.* "He's not going to make Ginny do anything, Percy", he said, shaking. "For one thing, she's not his son's girlfriend anymore. She's my girlfriend now. Ginny's fine. She's at Hog's End. Angelina is having the babies. Well, actually, she's already had the girl, Rowena. Madam Pomfrey is there, helping. She's probably had the boy now, as well. We had to take Ginny with us before using the Portkey to go to Fraserburgh. Malfoy was wondering why Ginny wasn't going with us, as we said that we were going to Hog's End because of the babies being born..."

Percy gripped his arm. "Draco Malfoy knows she's there? He can tell his dad!" Harry swallowed. *Oh god, he's right...*

"I'll go", Sirius said suddenly. "I'm not as knackered as the Aurors or the rest of you, I'm not a student, and I'm not needed to sail the ship. If Lucius Malfoy tries to attack Hog's End, he'll have me to deal with." His voice was very hard. Sirius put his hand on Harry's shoulder; Harry looked up at him.

"Take care of them", he whispered, missing Ginny dreadfully and now worried that she might yet again be targeted by Lucius Malfoy, as she was in her first year of school. Sirius nodded and took out his wand.

"Tell the headmaster where I've gone. When I get there, I'll also summon the operatives we had standing by for additional help. It's not the reason we told them we might need help, but that doesn't matter. No one's going to attack Hog's End on my watch."

He disappeared in the blink of an eye, and Sam came striding across the deck, frowning. "What's going on? Where's he off to?"

They all looked at each other nervously. Harry didn't like the idea of lying. He nodded at Percy. "Tell him. I'll go speak to Dumbledore."

When Harry returned to them, he wasn't clear whether Sam's original question had been answered. Instead, it seemed that they were telling Sam that Katie and Percy were now engaged. Harry forced a smile; it was good news. Was it so wrong for them to want to focus on something good?

"— and then he went down on one knee —" Katie was telling Sam, looking up at Percy with a glowing face, holding her fiancé's hand and looking positively delirious.

Sam looked flabbergasted. "Well, I'll be —" He was rendered speechless, and Aberforth came over to them to find out what was happening. When Katie and Percy told them, Aberforth cried out happily and hugged Katie firmly. Then he backed up from her, holding her by the shoulders, grinning.

"I can't believe our little Katie is engaged!" he said happily.

"Oh, Uncle Dick —" Katie said, coloring. "I'm not a little girl anymore."

Harry frowned, then realized that of course Katie had been accustomed to calling him Uncle Dick. He'd been her father's closest friend from the time he'd been released from Azkaban. When Aberforth had released Katie, Percy put his arm around her protectively again.

"I just wish we didn't have to wait to get married", Percy said quietly, looking at Katie as though no one else in the world existed. Behind Percy's head, the western sky was filled with orange ribbons, and Harry was shocked to realize that the sun was going down. They'd embarked on their voyage before sunrise. The days wouldn't be longer than the nights for another five weeks, but it still surprised him. The *Patricia* was moving with a gentle swaying motion now, and Harry turned to see Severus Snape at her helm, looking as at peace as he had in his other life when he was sailing. Maggie was at his side, beaming up at him. Suddenly, a *brilliant* thought occurred to him.

"If you like — you *don't* have to wait", he said to Percy.

Percy frowned, as he always did when he didn't think someone was making sense according to his strict definition. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't have to wait. Snape could marry you. He's the captain of the ship. We're at sea. If he agrees, we could have the ceremony right now, as the sun's going down."

Now it was Percy's turn to look flabbergasted. "I — I never thought of that. But — but don't you want a big wedding?" he said, to Katie. "A gown, party after, all that? Your dad to give you away —"

Katie put her arms around him. "My dad is already here. As for a big wedding, a gown and a party, I never wanted any of that. In fact, I thought when we did get married we'd just go to a registry office with our closest friends and some family, then have a nice dinner at Hog's End after. Instead of the registry office, we can have the ceremony here, and we can still have a nice dinner at your house after. I don't care about the rest of it. I just care about you", she said quietly, gazing up at him.

Percy grinned down at her, then glanced uncertainly at Sam. "How — how do you feel about this, sir?"

Sam looked appalled. "I think that if you call me sir one more time I shall have to see whether they have taught you how to defend yourself from gardeners during that Auror training of yours", he said, abruptly breaking into a grin. "I told you the first time we had dinner together, I'm just Sam. And — and I think the idea is just brilliant." he said, smiling lovingly at his daughter. "I was half afraid — well, more than half-afraid — that I wouldn't be coming home with a daughter, and find instead that I may be gaining a son."

Percy pulled Katie to him in a kiss after that, and when they separated, they were both grinning like mad. "So, then, are we actually doing this?" Percy asked, incredulous.

"Doing what?" Maggie asked, suddenly appearing at her brother's side.

"I can't believe we're doing this", Katie said, shaking her head in wonder. "But I'm so glad", she added, looking happily at Percy.

"And we'll have that dinner at Hog's End tonight!" Percy said with determination. He looked at Harry defiantly, as though Harry had suggested that this wouldn't be possible. *Keep them safe, Sirius*, Harry prayed. *We'll be there later, with a wonderful surprise...* This was a good

thing, he felt. It was something happy to distract them for a little while, before returning to their real lives and having to face the fact of those who hadn't made it because their bodies were at the bottom of the sea now, or because they'd been kissed.

"Doing what?" Maggie asked again. "Having dinner at Hog's End? That sounds lovely." Percy and Katie turned to her, grinning.

"We're getting married", Katie told her. Maggie gasped and hugged each of them, laughing.

"When?" she wanted to know.

"Now!" Percy said, shocking his older sister. Her jaw dropped open.

"Oh!" Hermione said suddenly. "It's perfect! You know what today is, don't you?"

Maggie had let Percy and Katie go; they frowned now. "No", Katie said. "We lost track of time while we were in there. Friday? Is that good, getting married on a Friday?"

"No, that's not what I meant!" she said, rolling her eyes and laughing. "It's Valentine's Day!"

Percy and Katie grinned at each other. "You're right, Hermione", Percy said, looking down at his bride. "It's perfect."

Ron laughed. "Charlie won't like it." His older brother looked at him blankly. Now it was Ron's turn to roll his eyes. "Bloody hell, am I the only one in the family who remembers when birthdays are? Today is Charlie's thirty-second birthday. And from now on, Charlie's birthday will also be your anniversary."

Percy flushed. "Sorry, Ron. I've always been very bad at that. But there *are* other people in the family who remember birthdays; the twins *always* remember Ginny's..."

Maggie gave Ron a mystified look. "Ginny's birthday is April Fool's Day", Ron told her. "The twins don't remember her birthday as *such*; it happens to be on the same day they think should be a national holiday..."

His older sister smiled at him. "So there will be two special things our family will celebrate on this day in future. A birthday — and an anniversary", she said, looking lovingly at Percy and Katie. Her gaze settled on Katie and she laughed. "And I'm getting another sister!" she crowed, gathering Katie into her arms for another hug.

When she released her brother's bride, Katie looked a little frightened. "And I'm getting quite a lot of brothers and sisters", she said softly. "I hope

no one expects *me* to memorize birthdays for quite a while, though", she added, looking slyly at Ron.

"No one will expect you to", Ron reassured her. Then he looked like he remembered something. "Wait! There will actually be *three* Weasley birthdays and an anniversary today. We forgot about George and Angelina's kids!" He smiled at Percy and Katie, shaking his head. "I can't believe the pair of you are getting married..."

"We just need to ask the captain", Harry said, nodding in Snape's direction. "Come on, I'll go with you." He pulled Katie by the hand, and Percy brought up the rear. The three of them wove around the others who had come back on deck, finally reaching Severus Snape at the tiller; he was now speaking to his uncle about the damage to the ship.

"Captain?" Harry said uncertainly. Snape turned away from his uncle.

"Excuse me a moment", he said to Duncan MacDermid, before turning to Harry. "Yes, Mr. Potter?" Something in his eyes told Harry that he was back to regarding him as a fellow sailor now. Harry didn't mind being 'Mr. Potter' again instead of 'Harry'; in his other life, when he'd been on board with his dad, he'd always been called 'Mr. Potter', and he'd called Jamie 'Miss Potter' at those times as well.

He didn't see the expression in Snape's eyes change when he explained what they were after. He glanced over Percy and Katie's faces, seeing the hope and anticipation there, and said, "Certainly. I will have my uncle take over for me here. Clear some space on the foredeck. I shall be there in a minute."

Harry started leaving with the thrilled Percy and Katie, but Snape's hand on his arm detained him. "Harry", he hissed between his teeth. "I've never done this before."

"You can do it. You're the captain —"

"I know that I *can* do it. I never *have* done it", he said, his jaw clenched. Harry realized that he was nervous. He tried not to grin and tease him about this.

"You'll be fine. You've been to weddings before", he added, consciously avoiding mentioning that the last one was Alicia and Roger's. This one promised to be very different.

Snape looked at him doubtfully, the uncertainty in his eyes still. He disappeared belowdecks briefly, to get ready, and Harry went to Percy and Katie, who were standing with Sam, Ron, Hermione, Maggie, Aberforth

and some other Aurors now, who were hugging and kissing them in congratulations.

"Save that for after the ceremony", Harry said, grinning. "The captain will be ready in a minute." Aberforth took out his wand and moved it delicately, pointing it toward the sails; fairy lights appeared to be clinging to the sailcloth now, glittering in the dusk, sending a glow over all of them. With another wave of his wand, the frigid air surrounding them gradually grew warmer, until it felt more like it was the middle of May, rather than the middle of February.

Suddenly, Ron pulled Harry aside. He looked uncomfortable and nervous. *You'd think he was the one getting married*, Harry thought. "Everything okay, Ron?"

Ron grimaced and looked over his shoulder to where Percy was standing with Katie. "I just thought of something, Harry."

"What?"

"Mum."

"I promise, I won't say anything." He paused. "But — what am I keeping mum about?"

"I didn't say 'keep mum', I said 'Mum'. As in *our* mum. Mine and Percy's and Maggie's. *That* mum."

"Oh", Harry said simply, having nothing else he could say. Then suddenly, it dawned on him what Ron meant. "Ooooooh", he said now, understanding why Ron looked a bit sick. Molly Weasley would be furious when she learned that Percy had married without her being present. Harry's mouth twisted as he regarded Percy and Katie. "Bit hard to stop things now, don't you think?"

Ron raised his eyebrows. "Oh, I have no intention of stopping them. As far as I'm concerned, they have every right to do this." He looked at Percy again and took a deep breath. "I just hope he realizes that it may mean another row with Mum when he gets back."

Harry shook his head. "No, you didn't see her when we called the Burrow from Snape's office. She'll be thrilled just to see him alive."

Ron looked shrewdly at him. "You haven't spent all that much time around my mum, remember. Even after it seems she's over it, she won't let this go for years to come. Trust me." He watched Percy and Katie kiss. "But I won't say a word beforehand. He'll put a stop to it if he remembers. It's better this way. Don't mention anything to him."

"Right. Mum about the mum." He and Ron laughed conspiratorially for a moment. Harry agreed with Ron. Fear of what Mrs. Weasley would say shouldn't stop the wedding.

"Places!" Hermione called, clapping her hands imperiously. Harry grinned at Ron, who backed up to get out of her way; Harry had seen that Ron had become rather good at recognizing the right time to give Hermione a wide berth. This was definitely one of those times.

Dumbledore stepped forward and held out something to Hermione which made her drop her jaw. "I believe we could use some music, Miss Granger, and I understand that you know what to do with one of these." He was handing her a beautiful cello, the varnished golden-brown wood gleaming in the setting sun. Her mouth was open in a slightly unflattering pose. Glancing up at the headmaster, she snapped it shut again.

"How — but why wasn't it smashed to bits —?"

He smiled warmly at her, his eyes twinkling. "I just transfigured a chair that was in the hold. It may need to be tuned", he acknowledged, as though this made it an imperfect Transfiguration.

She took it from him, along with the bow, gazing down at it wonderingly. "But — but a Transfiguration like this is very, very complicated. Most people could get something that *looks* like a cello, but for it to really *work* —" She stopped and swallowed, as though remembering to whom she was speaking. Instead, she stroked the bow across the strings briefly, and a deep, mellow beauty emanated from it that made her catch her breath. "Oh!" she said, and Harry knew that her inability to say more was in its way a more telling sign of her pleasure than if she had been able to go on at length about it.

Harry thought Dumbledore looked rather pleased with himself. "After all", he said, "what would a wedding be without music?" he said softly, looking at her over his spectacles. She grinned at him, and Harry wondered whether she'd want to go back to using her old cello after this.

He realized that this would only be the second wedding he'd ever been to in this life, Alicia's being the first. In his other life, there had been his mother and stepfather's wedding, as well as various weddings for family friends. (He'd never been taken to weddings of the Dursleys' family and friends, but was usually packed off to Mrs. Figg's on the rare occasion that someone wanted one of the Dursleys to witness their nuptials.)

As the sun sank lower, the orange and apricot streamers in the sky turning to deep red and gold, Hermione began to play the cello. Maggie, the maid-of-honor, walked down an improvised aisle between the `guests' — Aurors and their rescuers — with a bouquet of tiger lilies that Harry had seen Aberforth conjuring. Next came a beaming Sam with his daughter on his arm. The tattered robes she'd been wearing in the prison cell hadn't been Transfigured at all, merely cleaned with a spell. Katie carried herself with a dignity that couldn't have been surpassed had she been wearing a gown made for a princess. She also held a bouquet of tiger lilies; they picked up the colors of the dusky sky, as well as the Weasley hair. Sam smiled lovingly at his daughter when they reached Percy, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek. Percy was also in his old dusty robes, which made him appear absurdly dashing. Ron was by his side as his best man.

Snape wore an immaculate navy blazer with white flannels, making Harry wonder whether Dumbledore had been running around the ship Transfiguring everything in sight (everything except Percy and Katie's robes). When Hermione finished the piece she'd been playing, there was polite applause and Aberforth handed her another tiger lily bouquet; Harry escorted her down the aisle to stand next to Maggie as another bridesmaid, while he took his place as a groomsman, next to Ron.

The fairy lights twinkled above the crowd as they stood silently, respectfully, waiting for Snape to begin. He looked impassively at Katie and Percy, then gazed around at them all, finally beginning to speak:

"Since time immemorial, it has been the happy privilege of the captain of a ship to join two people in marriage", he intoned. The corners of his mouth turned up ever so slightly as he looked at Katie and Percy. "But I doubt any other captain has ever had the privilege of bringing two people out of a prison where they might have perished and launching them forward into a new life within the same twenty-four hour period."

"You just got out of prison, mate! Why sign on for more `ard time already?" shouted a voice from the crowd of Aurors, causing a ripple of laughter to roll through their audience. Percy and Katie joined in the laughter as they stood before Snape, holding hands.

"It's only a prison if you aren't volunteering for it!" Percy called back, never taking his eyes from his bride and looking happier than Harry had ever seen him.

When the laughter had died down again, Percy turned to Snape. "I know this is spur of the moment, sir, so we'll just do our own vows, I think."

Harry thought Snape looked very relieved. "Thank you", he said with feeling.

Katie handed her flowers to Maggie and the two of them faced each other, holding hands. Percy smiled at Snape for a moment before looking at his bride again. "Do you want me to go first?" he whispered to her.

She shook her head. "No", she whispered back. "I have no idea what I'm going to say, but I think I should do it before I'm crying too hard to speak", she said, laughing nervously. Tears were already wetting her cheeks, but Harry could tell they were happy tears. Percy nodded and grasped her hands a little more tightly.

"The first time I ever saw you", she said, her voice lifted now, carrying across the stillness of the crowd, "was when I was a first year and you were a fourth year, helping your brothers onto the train with their trunks. All that year — and in the many years since — I saw them play prank after prank on you, making you the butt of every joke they could come up with. And yet, when all was said and done, you still behaved toward them as you did on that first day I saw you. You're their big brother, helping them and guiding them and holding no grudges. No matter what they've done to you — and they've done quite a lot", she added, causing a ripple of laughter to move through the crowd again; "— you never tried to get revenge", she finished softly. Katie started crying a little harder and wiped away her tears with the back of one hand, murmuring, "God, I didn't know it would be so hard not to cry..." Hermione discreetly passed her a handkerchief, which she accepted gratefully.

When she had returned the handkerchief to Hermione, she steeled herself, looking up at him again, taking hold of both of his hands once more. "That's just who you are, Percy Weasley. You don't hold grudges. You look out for others whether or not they want you to, and whether or not there's anything in it for you." She swallowed and smiled at him. "I take you to be my husband, Percy Weasley, because I love you with all my heart and with all my soul, and because you are my inspiration and my guide, and I can think of nothing I would rather do than share my life with you and love you all my days."

Harry thought Percy looked very much like he might want to kiss Katie before it was time; he gazed at her with a look that burned, and Katie returned the look, shaking a little. "I'm done", she whispered to Percy. "It's your turn now."

Percy laughed out loud and continued to gaze at her. "A couple of years ago, I never thought I'd laugh again", he said. He looked very sober now, and Harry remembered the fate of poor Penelope, and Lucius Malfoy saying that it looked like Percy hadn't been thinking about her. Harry knew that it had been quite hard for Percy to get over Penelope.

"We have been living through terrible times and terrible deeds", he said, his voice quiet, yet still carrying across the deck, his words making Harry think again of Lucius Malfoy. "We have all lost loved ones, people whose friendships we treasure, people who were signposts on our way." Harry wasn't certain, but he thought that might be Percy's way of mentioning his first love. He tightened his grip on Katie's hands. "I have been fortunate enough to find another person whom I love, someone whose friendship I treasure dearly, and someone who is not only a signpost on my way, but —" He looked up, squinting, at a loss for words; as he scanned the horizon over Katie's shoulder, where the setting sun was disappearing behind a lighthouse on the shore that was already beaming its silent warning to all ships at sea. He grinned and looked into Katie's eyes again.

"I've felt so lost for much of the last four years. Now I shall never be lost again. It doesn't matter that we are marrying on a ship, with no fixed point, no permanent location. You are my true north, my way and my destination, all in one. And now you will be my wife. You found me; you found me, and your love is the beacon shining me home."

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand, giving a little gasp and starting to cry. Ron smile at her affectionately, while Maggie was gazing at Percy, looking frightfully proud of him. Harry thought Katie would utterly dissolve into tears any moment. He wished Ginny were there, in his arms. He knew she'd also cry, and then he could dry her tears...

"I believe", said a slightly amused voice, "that it is time for the rings?" Dumbledore had stepped forward, holding out two dark grey metal rings that appeared to have been transfigured from links of the anchor chain. Percy and Katie looked at him gratefully; he'd thought of everything.

When he withdrew again, each of them took a turn putting the ring on the other person's hand, murmuring, "*With this ring, I thee wed... with this*

ring, I thee wed..."

Maggie returned Katie's bouquet to her. Percy and Katie gave each other enormous grins and turned to Snape, holding hands. Harry was gratified to see that he was smiling back at them both, looking wonderfully like the man he'd called 'Dad' for so many years.

He lifted his strong voice again, saying, "By the power invested in me by international maritime law, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may —" Katie slid her arms up around his neck and Percy gathered her to him, pressing his mouth to hers, one hand holding her face up to his. "— kiss the bride", Snape trailed off, watching them.

Harry saw Maggie catch Snape's eye and smile. A cheer went up from the crowd, and when Percy and Katie separated their mouths, Katie threw her bouquet into the air, laughing. It seemed to hang there, suspended for an eternity, before it plunged down directly into Maggie's hands, so that now she had two bouquets. She laughed, looking at Snape, and Harry saw that their eyes were still locked as the crowd of Aurors descended upon Percy and Katie, thumping him on the back and kissing the laughing, happy bride. The lighthouse behaved as their own personal spotlight, adding to the illumination that the fairy lights already lent to the impromptu festivities, while the stars wheeled overhead and the *Patricia* sailed south toward Dover.

Home

Dumbledore conjured champagne for the celebration of Percy and Katie's wedding, but Harry had something else on his mind. After kissing the bride and shaking Percy's hand, he left the celebrating throng on the deck and went down the companionway into the hold, lighting his wand so that he could see in the dimness. When he found a lantern hanging on a beam, he lit it and was able to extinguish his wand. He gazed around the dank-smelling space, which was oddly quiet save for the slapping of the water on the hull.

In addition to transfiguring the Kissed Aurors into small animals — chiefly hamsters — Dumbledore, Hermione and Sirius had conjured small cages in which they would be safe, no matter how turbulent the seas became. Harry went from cage to cage, peering at them; they were very still, some of them on top of their companions in rather undignified poses, presumably from the rough seas they'd experienced. It was strange for Harry to see their dark little eyes staring into space, unblinking. If he hadn't been able to see the very small movements indicating that they were still breathing he wouldn't have believed that they were alive.

He stared at cage after cage, but none of the Kissed, Transfigured Aurors stirred. He tapped the side of one of the cages with his index finger. Nothing. He sighed. Then he remembered that they'd all been stunned, in addition to being Transfigured. No wonder they weren't moving.

But suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he did see a movement. One of the hamsters, a sleek black one, was twitching its nose, sniffing at the other animals in the same cage. Very carefully, Harry opened the door and took it out. Something about the look in its small dark eyes was familiar to him, and he held it close to his face, whispering, "Cho? Is that you?"

He reckoned they hadn't stunned her before turning her into a hamster. She still seemed somewhat dazed, looking at him as though she wasn't really seeing him, sniffing at his hand as though that would tell her all she needed to know about him.

He stroked her back and rubbed her between her small ears, taking out his wand. He started to remove the spell from her, to turn her back into a human, but then he remembered what Percy had said and thought better of

it. He sighed and put her back in the cage, closing the door carefully. She continued to sniff lethargically at the other hamsters in the cage with her, before settling down to sleep. Harry turned to leave, but immediately bumped into someone.

"You left the celebration, Harry", Dumbledore said gently. Harry had the feeling that he'd been watching him with Cho; he wondered whether he'd hidden himself using the Chameleon Transfiguration to be invisible, but didn't dare ask.

Harry shrugged. "I'm happy for them, and it was even my idea, but in some ways, I'm not feeling that much like celebrating now." He waved his hand at the cages. "All of these people are going to end up living the rest of their lives in St. Mungo's, and we didn't manage to get the dead off the island before we had to run for it. So to speak."

Dumbledore put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Well, I think you all did very well, considering what we were up against..."

Harry looked at him with narrowed eyes. "It's a good thing that both you and Ron have such good hearing, so we knew about the bomb. Only — I know Ron's reason for being able to do that. What's yours?"

Dumbledore gave him that sly look that always preceded an instance of his telling Harry, *You'll know when it's time*, or something similar. Harry grimaced, waiting for it, but to his surprise, Dumbledore nodded at him.

"I thought you might have forgotten about that." Harry shook his head. "Well, I'll tell you what Harry. You offer some guesses as to why you think I have exceptional hearing, and I'll tell you if you hit the mark."

Harry sighed. "I was rather hoping you might just *tell* me something for once." He tried not to sound irritated, but he wasn't sure he succeeded.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Ah, I see. After almost seven years of my cryptic answers, you've grown rather weary of my whimsical nature, have you?" he said cheerfully, not sounding a bit offended. Harry grinned at him.

"Maybe I thought that being Head Boy would mean I wouldn't have to follow clues and work out riddles every time you opened your mouth, that I'd be in the inner circle at last."

Dumbledore nodded. "And well you might think that." He looked intently at the cage where the hamster Harry was sure was Cho was sitting, still awake, looking at the two of them, it seemed. The ship rocked gently beneath their feet and Harry noticed for the first time that Dumbledore

seemed to have natural sea-legs; he hadn't stumbled or been awkward, that Harry had seen, since he'd boarded the ship. He wasn't sure whether that was part of the hearing mystery or not.

"Why don't you let her out again, Harry?" he said softly. Harry nodded and did as Dumbledore suggested. He held her in his hand, feeling her tiny heart beating rapidly against his palm. "Bring her up on deck, why don't you, give our former Head Girl some fresh air?"

Dumbledore's voice sounded strange to Harry, but he did as he suggested, following the headmaster back up the companionway. He and Harry walked slowly toward Ron and Hermione, where they stood near the starboard rail, sipping champagne. The fairy lights shed an ethereal glow over all and the wind filled the sails, pushing them on down the coast.

"Harry!" Hermione said when she saw him. "Oh, hullo, Professor Dumbledore", she said, nodding respectfully to the headmaster. "Where did you both go?"

"I went to check on Cho", Harry said, nodding at the hamster he was holding. Hermione's mouth became very thin.

"I'm glad she was Kissed", Hermione said bitterly. "I never thought I'd say that about anyone, but I'm glad. You know, when we were down in the hold and thought we might all die, I tried to think of other things, to keep my mind off that. Well, to keep my mind off that and spewing", she admitted, with a glance at Ron. "And something occurred to me — Ron told me that she left him to face Evan on his own last year, in the forest. But what if she was actually working *with* him? What if she *knew* about Viktor being Voldemort's heir, what if she was already a Death Eater *last year*, when she was Head Girl? She might not have needed to be under Imperius at all to give poor Professor Flitwick that potion! She could have just given him poison and killed him! And then after *that* she received the Order of the Phoenix!"

Harry felt the small animal in his hand squirm against his fingers, as though trying to get away. Suddenly, the bright eyes didn't look so glazed over anymore; they looked terrified. He tightened his grip and said grimly, "You may be right, Hermione."

Dumbledore nodded. "Speaking of honors", he said idly, gazing out at the dark beyond the ship, "you do realize that I will be recommending that you all receive the Order of Merlin for what you have done."

Hermione gasped and Harry was so surprised that he almost dropped the squirming little hamster. Cho was growing steadily more agitated.

"While — while we're still *in school*?" Hermione choked out. Ron was simply standing with his mouth open in shock.

"Yes", Dumbledore continued. "I shall also recommend that we have the ceremony in the Hogsmeade village hall, instead of at the Ministry. It holds nearly as many people as the Great Hall at Hogwarts and should work nicely. There will be a little time required to process some paperwork and for me to convince Cornelius — but I have no doubt that I shall prevail. You needn't look so worried, Harry."

"It's not that", Harry told him, frowning as he struggled to keep Cho confined in his grasp. "It's just — you *can't* give us the Order of Merlin while we're still in school."

Dumbledore's brows lowered over his eyes. "And why not?"

Harry grimaced. "Because poor Snape would — he'd have a meltdown. I remember how he was near the end of my third year, when he thought he was going to get the Order of Merlin for bringing in Sirius, and it didn't happen because Hermione and I helped him esc —" He stopped, seeing the horrified looks on Ron and Hermione's faces. "Erm", he managed to say. "He's standing right behind me, isn't he?" His voice shook and his two best friends nodded slowly, confirming what he had already had guessed.

He turned, expecting to see a very irate Severus Snape, but instead, Snape was looking at him with amusement, one corner of his mouth turned up. "Nice to finally hear you admit to it, Harry", he said sardonically. "Did you think that Sirius Black and I had worked together for almost three years without my asking him how exactly he managed to do me out of the Order of Merlin?"

Harry grinned at him. "Well, now you're going to get it. First Class, I should think", he said, looking sideways at Dumbledore, who nodded.

"And I think that if Miss Granger and Sirius receive Third Class, Severus might not have a `meltdown', as you put it", he said softly, his eyes twinkling at Harry over his half-moon spectacles. "I would recommend my brother as well, but he already has the Order of Merlin, First Class."

Harry's face dropped. "What about Ron? He saved your life!" He looked in distress at Ron, who seemed both a bit disappointed and yet resigned. But Dumbledore clapped him on the shoulder and smiled gently.

"As did you, pulling us from the sea in your griffin form. And while I do not think that my life is more important than the other lives saved, I will use that as a very good excuse to recommend Second Class for you and Mr. Weasley as well", he said with a wink.

Ron was standing in open-mouthed shock again, as Hermione launched herself at him, hugging him tightly. Harry slapped him on the back, grinning, and Snape didn't even appear to object to this.

However, as he congratulated Ron, he lost his grip on the hamster, and after Cho landed on the deck, she went scampering away from him. To his relief, Dumbledore was on top of things and pointed his wand at her.

"Finite Incantatem!" he cried.

Harry gasped; he was taking the Transfiguration spell off her! Suddenly, Cho Chang appeared before them all, standing in a slightly crouched position, her short sleek hair swinging around her chin, looking very alert and not the *least* bit as though she'd been Kissed by a dementor. Ron immediately lunged for her, but Dumbledore put his hand out to stop him.

"You nearly got us blown up!" he snarled at her, not really trying to get past Dumbledore; he obviously didn't want to hurt him. "Trying to bloody *rescue* you! Just because you wanted to throw your life away doesn't mean that *we* did!"

Hermione stepped forward and, surprisingly, slapped Cho across the face. Harry reluctantly pulled her back; she struggled against him. "You were trying to kill Harry and Ron, pretending to be Kissed", she spat. "You were trying to get as many people killed as you could, but we were too quick for you, pulling all of the Aurors out of there the way we did. It spoiled your plans. So you were going to take Harry and Ron with you..." she choked, as Harry held her.

Cho didn't look at Ron and Hermione, though they were the ones leveling accusations at her; she was looking at Harry, her dark eyes very cold, her mouth twisting in a smile. He shivered, but he didn't wonder for a moment how she had come to be like this, how she had become a Death Eater.

It's all my fault.

Then suddenly she turned and said simply, "You were right, Hermione", before abruptly changing before them all. Suddenly, a very large eagle was standing where Cho had been; she leapt up onto the rail

and launched herself into the night, her enormous wings beating against the cold February air.

Hermione gasped. "She's an Animagus!"

Harry sprang for the rail. "I'll change too, and go after her!"

But Dumbledore put his hand on Harry's shoulder; he looked up at the old man, who was still taller than him. He was shaking his head, looking grim. "She did exactly as I expected her to do", he said simply. "She learned to take on the form of an *erne* while studying under Professor McGonagall, taking rather longer than you and Hermione, more than three years. She didn't finish, in fact, until after she completed her seventh year. She finally registered with the Ministry last summer..." Hermione gasped; Harry could hardly believe it. *Cho had trained to be an Animagus too!* "I was starting to think she would wait until we docked to make her escape, so that she wouldn't have as far to fly. In her presence I made a great show of talking about how concerned I was that Sirius might splinch himself, going back to the Burrow from the ship. I had hoped that she might be leery of Apparating from the ship, and I daresay she was, as she exposed herself to the rest of you as an Animagus. No, this is far better..."

Harry's mouth dropped open, much as Ron's had. "You — you mean you did that on purpose? Let her get away?" He nodded. Harry was utterly confused. "And how is this better?"

"And what's an *erne*?" Ron wanted to know.

"An *erne* is a large sea eagle. And this is better because, as of this moment, she believes we are going down to Dover", Dumbledore explained calmly.

Hermione frowned. "We're not?"

"No. We never were. I originally suspected that she might decide to Apparate away at some point — which is why I wanted her to believe that only the Hogwarts Apparition teacher would be likely to do it successfully — and notify other Death Eaters of our location. That is why I allowed her to hear me speaking to Severus about Dover while in her hearing. It so happens that you all heard as well, and believed that to be our goal."

Harry looked at him shrewdly. "So, you were never fooled by her for a minute."

In the glow from the fairy lights, Dumbledore looked very old as he said, "No, I was not."

Ron crossed his arms. "So if we were never going to Dover, where *are* we going?"

"To Snape", Dumbledore said simply, raising his eyebrows. Harry, Ron and Hermione stared at each other, baffled.

"Erm", Ron began. "Professor Snape is right here", he said slowly, as though speaking to a simpleton.

Dumbledore looked at him indulgently. "To Snape, *Suffolk*", he said this time. "We shall need to navigate up the River Alde first. Nothing our fine captain cannot handle", he added with a nod to Snape.

Harry laughed. "So, we're actually going to a *town* named `Snape'."

Dumbledore shrugged. "There is a very old regional Ministry office there, not far from the bridge, in the Snape Maltings. Lovely concert hall there; you would enjoy their music festival in June, Miss Granger. It is quite famous." He smiled gently at his Head Girl. "It will be possible for the three of you, Severus and Miss Dougherty to return to Hogsmeade by Floo, as well as the new Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Sam. Aberforth can use Floo to go to the central Ministry offices in London with the Aurors who were imprisoned and Kissed, and a definitive list of the dead can be compiled after the fact. For the identities of the Death Eaters who were killed during the fighting, we shall have to rely upon eyewitnesses. And I believe that all of the Aurors who were imprisoned, after a bit of rest, shall have their hands quite full running to ground all of those escaped prisoners." He didn't mention the dementors, and Harry tried not to shiver at the thought of them. "After he helps to sort out the Aurors in London, my brother can come to Hog's End for the celebration, and I will return Severus' vessel to her proper place in the Firth of Clyde."

"Yes, what about the wedding dinner?" Hermione asked.

"Ah, yes, quite. Well, having it this evening is really out of the question, isn't that right, Severus? How long is the river?"

"About twenty-one miles. The entry point is at Shingle Street in Orford. We'll actually be navigating the Ore at the start; between Orford and Aldeburgh it changes to the River Alde, but I couldn't tell you where. I haven't been in these parts for years..."

Harry narrowed his eyes, thinking hard. "Before your parents died, you came here one summer with your uncle for the yacht races held by the Aldeburgh Yacht Club", he said softly, vaguely remembering something

his dad had said to him in his other life. He looked up at Snape, who swallowed, nodding.

"That was over twenty-five years ago", he replied in a quiet, even voice. Clearing his throat, he turned to the headmaster again. "The entrance is shingle, but the banks can get very muddy, if I remember. It is a tidal river, and we shall need the high water level that is present much of the night in order to navigate up to the bridge; at low tide it is little better than a narrow stream and you are lucky if you can avoid grounding a dinghy."

"So perhaps we shall arrive by morning?" Dumbledore asked. Snape nodded.

"It will be necessarily to do so well before that, else we'll be sitting in mud when the tide goes out. But there is no reason we cannot. As the moon has only been waning for one night, the high tides are very high yet, especially as we're getting close on the start of spring. But that also means the low tides are *very* low, and will expose most of the hard. There is a fair breeze from the northeast at five knots, but it is not storming. It'll do."

Dumbledore nodded to him, then turned to Harry, Ron and Hermione. "Once we arrive in Snape and reach the Snape Maltings, it won't be long before you're back in Hogsmeade. Percy and Katie shall have their wedding banquet", he said, his eyes twinkling. Harry felt his heart swell; he would see Ginny at Hog's End! He thought again of why Sirius had Disappeared from the *Patricia* and prayed again, silently, for the safety of everyone in that house. "I think that if you return to the castle by Monday morning", Dumbledore finished, "no harm will be done." That sounded fine to Harry; more time with Ginny away from Hogwarts.

But now Hermione looked still more distressed. "But — but — Harry and I will miss the Sunday night prefects' meeting!"

Ron and Harry both laughed. He was strongly reminded of the end of their second year, when Hermione had been so upset by the exams being canceled. "I honestly think you can miss a meeting for once, Hermione", Ron said, grinning at her.

"I'm not so sure", Harry said, chuckling more than he knew he should be. "She might go into withdrawal or something." He had seen that Hermione *loved* being in charge of the prefects' meetings. They were always run strictly by Robert's Rules of Order, had firm agendas, and

moved along quickly, if rather brusquely at times. She brooked very little discussion.

Hermione stuck her tongue out at them both and crossed her arms. "Someone has to keep the prefects from thinking they can just do anything they want. Eddy Shire takes any opportunity to take points away from a house other than Slytherin."

Harry saw Snape's mouth twisting as though he was trying to stifle his laughter as well. "And that is a problem *why*?" he asked her, raising his eyebrows. She flushed and Harry and Ron laughed.

"So we probably won't dock until near morning?" Ron asked. "When I thought we were going to Dover, I reckoned we'd still be on our way through tomorrow and part of the way into Monday."

"How soon before we begin our journey along the Alde, Severus?" Dumbledore asked him.

"We're nearly to Orford now, actually", Snape informed the headmaster. Harry saw that Duncan MacDermid was at the tiller now. He saw where Harry was looking and said, "I shall take the tiller myself before we get to the estuary and onto the river proper. There is a shifting shingle bar across the entrance. It is notorious in sailing circles for being unpredictable. We don't want to be swept onto the shoals. Most boats in these parts never actually cross the bar; they stay to the Ore, Alde and Butley rivers. And as we shan't be needing to secure a buoy in Orford, we needn't bother the harbormaster there."

"Will you need me, Captain?" Harry asked Snape, who shook his head.

"Get some rest, Harry. There are markers all up the Alde that show where the shallows are, but we shan't need to worry about that for hours, when we're closer to low tide." He put his hand on Harry's shoulder and Harry felt very much like he had his dad back; he'd felt that way several times during the trip, but never as much as at this moment.

"Yes, sir", he answered obediently. He, Ron and Hermione bade the others good night and went down the companionway into the hold; Harry led them to the berths in the fo'castle and Ron and Hermione climbed into one bunk together, fully clothed. He chose one of the others, wishing that Ginny was with him. He hoped again that she and the rest of her family were all right. His eyes finally closed and he slipped into dreamless slumber, lulled by the gentle rocking of the *Patricia*.

* * *

When Harry awoke it was three o'clock by his watch; he could see it well by the moon beaming in through the porthole above his bunk. He felt surprisingly well-rested and decided to leave Ron and Hermione, still sleeping peacefully, to go up on deck.

He pulled his woolen pea coat close around his body when he reached the deck; the spell that had earlier made the air on the deck feel spring-like, for the wedding, had faded, and the air that struck him full in the face was hard and cold and full of winter once more. There was a mild wind pushing gently at the sails, and he saw Duncan MacDermid stowing the topsail, in fact, which Maggie had just thrown down to him; they not only wouldn't need that kind of thrust in the narrow channel, it would make it harder for Snape to steer properly. They had to tread a fine line between going quickly enough to beat the ebbing tide and yet be able to prevent the *Patricia* straying into shallow water.

He found Snape near the tiller, staring hard at the water to either side of the hull; Harry saw that tree branches had been thrust into the mud banks to indicate the deeper water. In the moonlight, Harry could see that some of the branches had fading red or green paint on them; he asked Snape about this, hoping he wouldn't think he was a pest.

Snape continued to watch the water carefully; Harry could see a good bit of damp wood below the high-water marks on the withies, and he wondered how soon the water level would be dangerously low. "Red for port, green for starboard", Snape told him shortly.

Ah, right, Harry remembered. *That way you know to which side of the withy is deep water.* "Right, sir. Forgot." Harry had to squint to see even a trace of paint on some of the branches, though, as it was so faded. He realized that this was why Snape was concentrating so hard; before he moved his hand on the tiller, he needed to make certain he knew whether the withy was directing him to the left or right. An error meant being grounded, most likely.

Maggie ambled over to them, looking rather weary. "Do you need me up here, or can I go below for a while?"

"We are past the marsh", Snape told her. "My uncle should be able to help if we actually need to do any tacking, which is doubtful with the wind so mild. Get some rest; Harry's here now, too, should the wind kick up."

"Take the bunk I was using in the fo'castle", Harry told her. "Ron and Hermione are down there, too."

She smiled at him and quickly pecked Snape on the cheek before leaving; he gave her an affectionate look before going back to staring at the withies; he couldn't afford to be distracted and she knew that. After she was gone, they both remained silent for some time, Harry keeping an eye on the withies, should Snape's eyes prove to be weary. He watched the older man's hand on the tiller and saw him moving in the expected ways. Harry had to squint very hard at times to spot the paint color on the branches.

At length, Harry could see the bridge in the distance; it was an old Roman style structure, a single stone arch giving the impression that you could go under it and continue up the river, but the *Patricia* would never fit under such a space. Harry leapt onto the dock when they had drawn alongside it, tying up the painter with a flourish, feeling exhilarated. They'd done it; they'd rescued the Aurors and would soon be going back to Hogsmeade, going home.

It's not your home, he had to remind himself suddenly. But in some ways, it would always be his home. He knew that he really shouldn't have been surprised that his feet had taken him to Ginny's bedroom during the summer; it had felt as natural to him as breathing. He had lived there for over ten years, even though it was only during the summer months and the Christmas and Easter Holidays since he had turned eleven. She had been an occasional guest in that house for only a few years, since Percy had purchased it with the money that used to belong to Lucius Malfoy.

Lucius Malfoy. That wasn't a good thought. He had no earthly reason to like Weasleys. When he left Percy in Azkaban to die, he'd probably thought that justification for Percy having 'stolen' his money. Percy and Katie had just married; nothing would touch them, Harry promised himself. There was also no love lost between the Bells and Lucius Malfoy, either; it was because of him that Sam had gone to prison and Katie had been placed under Imperius, ordered to pursue Harry during his fifth year. *And I'll never let Lucius Malfoy hurt Ginny again*, he thought with determination, remembering the sight of her frail little body in the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry leapt back to the deck, looking to Snape for further instructions. "You're very keen, Mr. Potter", Snape said to him.

"Please, sir — I want to make certain everything's all right at Hog's End. Lucius Malfoy —"

Snape nodded. "Of course. It's natural to be concerned", he said slowly.

He met Harry's eye and the familiarity of the situation was almost painful. *You were a good dad*, Harry wanted to tell him. He'd told him this before, but he still wasn't certain Snape believed it.

It took some time to roust everyone from sleep and hustle them onto the dock. Aberforth and Sam led the Aurors to the local Ministry Office, some of them carrying the cages containing their erstwhile comrades. Harry wondered what the good people of Snape, Suffolk would think if they looked out their windows and saw this queer parade of bedraggled wizards walking toward the dark concert hall. *Probably tell themselves they're still dreaming and go back to bed*, he realized, knowing that Muggles' brains were very good about helping them cope with otherwise inexplicable sights. Harry, Ron and Hermione hung back, waiting for Dumbledore, Maggie and Snape. When they'd all disembarked, Dumbledore untied the painter and withdrew his wand from his robes again; after the ship was reduced in size once more, he summoned it neatly into his hands and walked along with them, just as though he were toting a model of a ship.

They proceeded past a pub called The Plough and Sail until they finally reached the Snape Maltings. Dumbledore led them to a blank wall in side of the building which suddenly became a door when he waved his hand casually in front of it. They all entered, finding not a concert hall, but a dingy little office overflowing now with Aurors. Harry thought that it was probably just as well that no one who normally worked in the office was around at four-thirty in the morning; they'd probably be completely overwhelmed.

Aberforth made his way to them through the crowd. "About half have gone through to London", he told them. "I think the supply of Floo powder I found in the clerk's desk will do for all of us. You might want to leave a note for the poor bloke, Albus, explaining where all of it's gone. He might take it better if it comes from you."

They waited for more of the Aurors to go through, and then Percy, Katie, Hermione, Ron, Aberforth and Sam finally went. Harry nodded at Snape, Maggie and Dumbledore before he stepped toward the fire, but suddenly, Dumbledore thrust his hand at him.

"Good work, Harry", he said simply, looking at him over his half-moon spectacles.

Harry grinned at him. "Thank you, sir", he said before throwing his powder into the fire and crying, "*Hog's End!*"

Harry stumbled out of the drawing room fire, coughing a bit from the soot. Percy, Katie, Hermione, Ron, Aberforth and Sam were standing about talking to each other, along with Fred, Sirius, Mrs. Figg and another wizard he knew he'd seen before. Ginny was standing to the side, and the moment he saw her, alive and well, he lost all semblance of self-control and launched himself at her. She met him half-way, and then there was nothing in the world but Ginny's arms around him, Ginny's mouth opening under his, Ginny's hair caught in his fingers...

When they came up for air, they noticed that everyone else in the room had stopped to gawp at them, and Harry felt himself redden. He'd been followed out of the fire by Maggie and Snape, who looked highly amused. Fortunately, Harry noticed that not only were Ron, Fred and Percy *not* looking hostile, they also seemed somewhat amused, and Katie was giving him and Ginny a gentle, friendly smile while clutching Percy's arm. Sirius strode to him and enveloped him in a hug. Harry grinned at him and hugged back.

"So", he said, "is it too much to hope that when Lucius Malfoy attacked you all stupefied him and turned him over to the Ministry?"

"Actually, it's too much too hope that he attacked. We haven't a clue where he might be. It's been quiet as a church around here, except for —"

An ear-splitting wail was suddenly heard from the upper reaches of the house and Harry turned to Fred, grinning. "The babies?"

Fred nodded, looking very tired. "Rufus finally arrived yesterday at about three o'clock. I don't think we're ever *really* going to have peace around here again. Tell me once more why I moved in with my brothers after leaving home?"

Ron laughed. "When I finish school, maybe we can get a flat together and you can escape the Wailing Ones", he said, only to receive an instant glare from Hermione. Ron was frowning now. "What? What did I say?" he demanded, as Hermione's brow furrowed and she drew her lips into a very thin line.

Harry and Ginny looked at each other, shaking their heads and smiling; in some ways, when it came to Hermione, Ron was still as thick as when he was in his third and fourth years.

Fred, however, picked up on it. "That'd be fine with me. You *are* in the habit of walking about in the morning with nothing on, right Hermione?" he asked innocently, raising his eyebrows.

"Oh, er, on second thought —" Ron said quickly, finally catching on.

The rest of them laughed, and soon after they were in the large old kitchen, eating whatever food was available, sitting round the long table talking and making plans for the special dinner that would come later, to celebrate Katie and Percy's wedding. The wizard Harry hadn't been able to put a name to was Mundungus Fletcher; he remembered that Fletcher had been at the ceilidh, wearing Clan MacGregor, like him. Fletcher and Mrs. Figg had come to Hog's End at Sirius' bidding, to protect against the Death Eater attack that wasn't.

When George entered, carrying one of his children in each arm, looking very proud, a roar went up, and Maggie and Hermione each claimed one of the babies, while Katie took turns cooing at each of them. Even Ron took an interest in the newest Weasleys, declaring that Rowena looked like she would favor her mother, which was a lucky thing, as he wouldn't wish for any girl to look like George. Rufus would just have to tolerate being told he looked like his dad.

George merely laughed at this; he looked happier than Harry had ever seen him, with the possible exception of the time he'd caught George and Angelina in bed together during the infamous Christmas party in his fifth year. The thought of what they were very likely doing during that party made him shift uncomfortably in his chair, and when Ginny asked him whether he was all right, his reply of, "Never better", came out a bit squeaky, making her stare.

At length, they heard footsteps in the corridor outside the kitchen and Molly and Arthur Weasley entered, stopping short when they saw everyone. "Oh! I came to check on the babies. Why didn't anyone say that you'd returned?" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed, pulling Percy and Ron to her. She didn't have to talk Maggie into anything; as soon as she'd handed little Rufus over to Katie, she was throwing her arms around her mother and brothers both. Mrs. Weasley also had to hug Hermione and Harry, but Harry noticed Katie standing nervously to one side, awkwardly rocking Rufus to and fro, waiting. Finally, Percy took the baby from her and handed his nephew back to Maggie. He put his arm around Katie's shoulder and brought her to his mother.

"We've something to tell you, Mum."

Harry watched Mrs. Weasley's face very carefully as she learned that she had a daughter-in-law. He saw the initial flash of anger, but that was quickly pushed down as she gathered Katie to her, hugging her firmly. She looked at Percy over Katie's shoulder, and Harry had a feeling that she didn't want another row with him, after very nearly losing him. Then she held Katie at arm's length, saying, "Aren't you pretty? And also an Auror, yes?" Katie nodded; Harry could see that she was shaking. Mrs. Weasley seemed to be biting back a comment about Katie's job. They all waited while she continued to regard Katie; the silence was deafening.

"Well", she finally said, "these days — I reckon no one has the time to plan weddings", she said, her jaw clenched rather tightly, looking at George out of the corner of her eye. "And it's not as though *your* father was there either", she added cheerfully, as though this was a comfort to her. Katie looked uncertainly at Percy; Mrs. Weasley evidently didn't know that Sam was there, that he had in fact given Katie away.

Arthur Weasley broke the uncomfortable tension by stepping forward and kissing Katie on the cheek. "I am very happy to have another daughter", he said warmly. Then he noticed Sam hovering nearby and put his hand out to him. "And Sam Bell!" he cried happily. "It's been years! And now we're family!"

Sam flushed and shook Mr. Weasley's hand; Harry could tell that Sam felt awkward about seeing people again whom he'd known before going to prison. They all *knew* why he hadn't been about for years. "Well, actually, Mrs. Weasley —"

"Molly", she insisted, patting his arm sympathetically.

"Er, yes, Molly. You see, the thing is — I *was* there." Sam looked at her earnestly.

Silence.

The expression in Molly Weasley's eyes was not one Harry ever wanted to see directed at *him*. He whispered to Ginny, "*Let's get out of here.*" She nodded and they managed to slip inconspicuously into the butler's pantry, which led to the dining room. However, Harry had forgotten that this was now the office from where Weasley Wizard Wheezes was run. Percy had a large desk in here sitting behind a couch which faced the fire. He didn't particularly care where they were, though, as he pulled Ginny to him and lowered his mouth to hers. She responded at

first, but then she just turned her head and clutched at him, her cheek against his shoulder, and he felt tears wetting his sleeve, her body beginning to convulse with sobs as the shock of it all finally took her over.

"There, there", he said gently, leading her to the couch, pulling her onto his lap. As she cried into his neck, he rocked her and whispered soft reassurances in her ear. Finally, she lifted her tear-stained face to him and pulled the amulet out of the neck of her blouse. "I — I —" she tried to say, hiccuping and looking so adorable that Harry had to try very hard not to smile. "I *saw*", she finally managed to say, holding out the amulet to him. He knew what she meant. He was horrified, remembering being on the horizontal mast, the ship going up and up, the bone-shattering impact when they'd gone over the first really massive wave. *She must have thought she was going to see me die*, he realized.

He kissed her face all over, feeling tears steal into his eyes as he thought about what he'd put her through. "I never should have given you the amulet..." he said to her, full of remorse.

She took it off and placed it over his head. "You have it again, Harry. It was my gift to you in the first place", she added, her voice ending on a croak. As she drew her hand away, he saw something on her right palm, and he held it up to his scrutiny now, staring at it; fading but still visible was the dark pink image of the basilisk. She had been clutching it so tightly for so long that it was in her very skin.

He looked at her in distress. "Did you stop holding it for a second while we were gone?"

She bit her lip. "Once. When Angelina had had Rufus and I held him. But that was it. I gave him back to her quickly; I wanted to make sure you were all right... And when I saw you pull Ron and Professor Dumbledore from the sea..." She was crying again, or still — he wasn't completely certain she had ever stopped. "Thank you", she whispered. "Thank you for saving him. And Percy..."

He'd been living all of it so quickly, everything coming in a rush, that it hadn't occurred to him how it would look to Ginny, how she would be constantly on edge, sitting in Hog's End, clutching the amulet. He gazed at her affectionately and cupped her cheek in his hand, then lowered his hand in order to draw her palm to him, imprinted with the basilisk. He brought it to his lips, kissing the image gently, making her gasp at the sensation. When he use his tongue to lightly trace the great snake's outline on her

skin, he could feel her trembling at his touch. He started to work his way up to her wrist, then kissing the inside of her forearm, pushing up her sleeve.

"Hello, Harry Potter."

He almost jumped out of his skin when a small green head poked out from under the fabric and looked calmly up at him. He sat staring at her for what seemed a long time while he waited for his heart to slow down again. He swallowed and finally said, "Hello, Sandy", then looked up at Ginny. "So", he said, his voice sounding slightly strangled. "You've been wearing Sandy on your arm."

"Yes", Ginny said, also having regained the ability to breathe normally (although he liked the fact that he had been responsible for her recent very erratic breathing). "She's been quite chatty since you left. Wish I knew what she's been saying. After Sirius arrived, I was half afraid that every time she said something it was about Lucius Malfoy attacking." She gently withdrew the garden snake from her sleeve and Sandy wrapped herself around Ginny's hand while Ginny stroked her smooth length. "Even though I didn't know what she was saying, I enjoyed taking care of her, though. She feels very nice. I remember the first time you let me touch her..."

Harry laughed; suddenly, everything they were saying seemed like a double entendre, and he just couldn't help himself.

"What?" Ginny said with wide-eyed innocence.

Suddenly the door opened and Ron and Hermione crept in, their backs to Harry and Ginny. "Do you think Mum saw us leave?" Ron whispered to her.

"I don't think so", Hermione said softly. "She was just sort of glaring at Percy and Sam. And Maggie and Snape."

"Good", Ron said quietly, pulling her to him and starting to lower his mouth to hers. Before their lips made contact, however, he stopped cold, having noticed Harry and Ginny sitting on the couch, staring back at them. "Erm", Ron began awkwardly. "So this is where you two have hidden." He turned Hermione to face them and said needlessly, and too loudly, "Hermione! We've found Harry and Ginny!"

Hermione rolled her eyes, a smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. "Yes, because Harry and Ginny are just *so dim* that they really believe that's why we came in here", she intoned. Ron shuffled his feet a little, embarrassed.

Ginny laughed. "No, we thought you were here for the same reason we are — to get away from the kitchen before Mum's temper starts making the pots and pans fly about."

Ron grinned. "Too right. She was fine until Sam had to go and tell her that he'd been at the wedding."

Harry shrugged. "I know Sam. I reckon he decided that they should begin as they mean to go on. His relationship with your parents, I mean. He's Percy's father-in-law. He wanted to be honest with your mum. Think what a row there would be if she only found out *later* that Sam was there! This way the blow-up will be out of the way and everyone can get on with their lives. Besides, she has the babies to distract her now, as well. She'll be fine, and Percy and Katie and Sam will be fine."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know. Mrs. Weasley doesn't seem very inclined to get over this soon. I mean, we can't exactly turn back the clock and get her to the ship, can we? She can never *really* attend Percy's wedding, even if another ceremony is held. It's not quite the same."

Harry's mind suddenly lit up with the solution. "There doesn't have to be another ceremony." He stood suddenly, surprising Ginny, but he simply picked her up when he did this, and then deposited her on her feet. He bolted out of Percy's office, grinning, and he heard the others following after as he returned to the kitchen.

Mrs. Weasley was sniffing into a handkerchief while Percy and Katie stood nearby. "Please, Mum", Percy wheedled. "It wasn't like we had a big wedding and invited other people but not *you*, now is it? It was all very spur of the moment. Sam happened to be there because he was worried about Katie. I proposed to her when we were still in Azkaban, but I never *intended* to marry without you being present."

"That's all my fault, Mrs. Weasley", Harry said suddenly, stepping up to her. "If you want to blame anyone for that, blame me."

Mrs. Weasley glanced up at him, startled that he was suddenly involved in the conversation. Percy put his hand on Harry's arm. "You don't have to do this, Harry."

He looked Percy in the eye. "But I should. It's the truth. She shouldn't be angry with you or Sam or Katie, or with Professor Snape for performing the wedding, or Ron and Maggie for being best man and maid of honor." He turned back to Mrs. Weasley. "I should have considered how you'd feel, but I didn't. It just seemed like — well, like we'd all just been through so

much horrid stuff and needed something *good* to celebrate. I saw men and women who'd been fighting Death Eaters, who'd seen their comrades killed or Kissed by dementors, and people who hadn't eaten for days clapping and cheering and *smiling* when Percy and Katie were pronounced husband and wife", he said softly to her. "When we opened those cells, the Aurors looked ready to die, and fully expected to." He looked fondly at Katie. "Percy and Katie reminded them all that there's still plenty to live for."

Mrs. Weasley faltered for a moment. "I see, Harry. Well, far be it from me to be so selfish", she started to say, sounding contrite; "although I didn't know it *was* selfish to want to attend one's own son's wedding", she added, the contrition leaving as quickly as it had come. Harry grinned at her.

"You can still attend the wedding", he told her. She looked up, frowning, and Percy and Katie looked very alarmed.

"Now see here, Harry old boy", Percy started to say.

Katie looked exasperated. "I already *said* that I didn't want a big wedding to begin with; just a trip to a registry office. And now we're supposed to do it all *over again*?"

Harry smiled secretively. "Not at all." He turned to Mrs. Weasley. "You can see them get married for the *first* time." He tried not to laugh at her baffled expression. "I have a Pensieve, Mrs. Weasley. I'll put my memory of the wedding in there, and you can go in and see it. It'll be just as if you were there, but without the seasickness", he added, catching Hermione's eye, grinning.

He was unprepared for Mrs. Weasley throwing her arms around him and hugging him tightly. "Oh, you dear boy!" she exclaimed, as he struggled to breathe. When she had released him, she turned to Ginny. "Well, we have work to do, putting together a wedding dinner in only a few hours, and I'll need your help", she said, very brisk and businesslike now.

Harry grinned at Ginny. It had worked! Mrs. Weasley was no longer angry, and they could get on with the business of celebrating. As Mrs. Weasley swung into party-planning mode, with Katie, Ginny, Hermione and Maggie to help her, Sirius pulled him aside, nodding at him.

"Good work, Harry. Keeping a mother-in-law in line is a good thing to be able to do *before* getting married."

"Yeah, but Katie hadn't been around Mrs. Weasley much, she didn't know that —"

"I wasn't talking about Katie", he said, his dark eyes snapping with mischief.

"Sirius! We're — we're just —"

His godfather laughed. "I'm sorry, Harry. I won't joke about it again. You can be very crafty when you want to be, that's all. You know very well that you're the last person in the world Molly Weasley would ever be angry with, so you took the blame."

"I wasn't lying about that. It *was* my idea. I wasn't just taking the blame — it *belongs* to me."

Sirius was still smiling broadly, and now Snape, Mrs. Figg and Mundungus Fletcher had joined their small circle, along with Ron, Percy and Fred. "At any rate, we need to discuss security for this little party." He nodded at Percy. "I'm not saying you shouldn't be celebrating — but we can't let our guard down. We still have to stay on our toes. Your mum will be needing to get some supplies for that, and she'll need an escort. I recommend going to some Muggle stores, avoiding wizarding places."

Percy nodded. "Right. Katie and I will go with Mum to do the shopping. I have some Muggle money, left over from before the Gringotts siege ended. Should be enough for everything we need. And we're not going to be contacting anyone who isn't already in the house."

"Good. Keep it exclusive. Less of a security risk that way. All right", Sirius said, nodding. "Now — house security. We'll need to take turns securing the north, south, east and west facades, and inside, someone to keep an eye on the fire. I don't think we should take the house off the Floo network, though. I do think we should put anti-Apparition wards on the place. Just because Lucius Malfoy hasn't attacked yet, doesn't mean he isn't going to. He'd love to break up a party like this, after all. He's probably furious that Cho Chang led them all down to Dover for no reason. Or at least, I hope she did, as Dumbledore told me that he's going to have the Ministry send a contingent of their best Aurors to ambush them. Hopefully he won't work out ahead of time that it was a ruse. We very likely won't learn whether that went well until later. Oh, and that reminds me — don't forget to keep an eye out for an especially large eagle."

Mrs. Figg and Fletcher were baffled by this, so Sirius explained. Harry caught Ginny's eye across the room, as she listened to her mother's plans

for the party. She smiled back at him and he felt that everything was getting close to being all right. Or it would be, if only they knew what Lucius Malfoy was up to.

* * *

The party was a roaring success. Mrs. Weasley was in her element, Percy and Katie looked very happy, the cake was beautiful, and Mr. Weasley was snapping his camera every few seconds, it seemed, looking quite giddy.

They'd cleared the drawing room of furniture to use it for dancing, although they had to settle for the wireless, as there was no time to hire a small ensemble. Harry was drinking some punch and talking to Ron and Hermione when Ginny walked toward him, her hand out, and soon he was thrusting his cup of punch at Ron and following her onto the dance floor.

He remembered holding her in his arms the previous summer, at a very different sort of wedding. She'd looked so beautiful, but it was hardly surprising, as she'd taken great care with her hair and makeup, and Alicia had dressed her. She looked like her normal, everyday self now, and even more lovely, he thought, than when she'd been Alicia's bridesmaid.

Harry was able to hold her close to him without wincing; before the party, he'd gone up to the new nursery, where Angelina and Madam Pomfrey were bathing the babies, and Madam Pomfrey had examined his welts and healed them quickly. He'd started to go, but the babies had rather fascinated him, and Angelina had let him hold little Rufus after his bath, swaddled in a towel with a small hood attached. His creamy tan skin was a dark pink in places, after his bath, his bushy reddish-brown hair still slightly damp. He really did resemble George, if George's features were softened a bit. He smiled up at Angelina, rocking Rowena, who'd been fretful during her bath.

"Why the name Rufus?" he had asked.

"Ah, you think you know the reason for the name `Rowena', do you?" she had asked him slyly.

He'd laughed. "I take it that means she wasn't named for Rowena Ravenclaw."

Angelina had shaken her head. "Not at all. The name `Rowen' means `red-haired'. So does the feminine form, `Rowena'. But we didn't want to name one of them `Rowen' and one of them `Rowena'. It so happens that Rufus also means `red-haired'."

Harry had laughed. "That Weasley hair does have a way of cropping up, doesn't it?"

She'd shrugged. "We reckoned that even if their hair was more brown than red they were good names. Twin names should sound well together. I quite like the sound of `Rufus and Rowena'."

Harry had nodded. "It's good. Coming down to the party?"

She'd shaken her head, gazing down into Rowena's little face as she yawned and stretched her little arms, tiny fists flailing in the air. "My party is right here", she'd said dreamily, leaning down to press her lips against the soft buttery cheek.

Harry held Ginny closer to him as they danced, his face buried in her hair; he'd been afraid that he'd never hold her like this again, and now, here they were, dancing in the drawing room of his home. In a way. He gazed down at her and remembered Percy's vows; he knew just what he meant now. *Ginny's my home*, he thought, gathering her to him again as a new song emanated from the wireless.

After a few more songs, the news came on, being reported by a woman with a cultured voice that was not unlike what Harry was accustomed to hearing on the BBC. Percy was about to turn the wireless off, but he stopped when he heard what the report was about:

"The Ministry of Magic has announced that a daring rescue mission headed by Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore has been successful in retrieving the Aurors who went missing after the Death Eaters convicted in the Gringotts siege were transported to Azkaban. Minister Fudge is overjoyed at Dumbledore's success."

Fudge's voice was heard now, saying, *"Everything went as planned. We regret that we needed to tell the relatives of our brave Aurors that nothing was being done for the moment, but it was necessary for security reasons that news of the mission not reach the wrong ears, if you know what I mean. I always had the utmost confidence in Albus and knew that if anyone could do it, he could."*

"Liar!" Harry cried indignantly. Ginny clutched at his arm, looking worried.

The woman's voice returned. *"The returned Aurors are being debriefed now and should be back to work after a short holiday to regain their strength and visit with their families. Casualty lists will be released shortly. In a controversial move, Dumbledore included Hogwarts students*

on the mission, namely Head Boy, Harry Potter, and Head Girl, Hermione Granger, who are both to receive the Order of Merlin, an unheard of honor for a wizard and witch still in school..."

Hermione looked up, frowning. "Why isn't she mentioning Ron?"

"Hogwarts instructors Sirius Black and Severus Snape were also part of the mission. Relatives of missing Aurors should send owls to the Ministry for more information."

When the music started again, they looked at each other, stunned. There was nothing about Ron, nothing about him, Sirius and Snape receiving the Order of Merlin; nothing about the dementors being loose and the prisoners having been freed by the Death Eaters (such as Lucius Malfoy); nothing about the purpose to which the missing Swedish Short-Snouts had been put; and finally, nothing about Azkaban being destroyed. There was also nothing about whether Remus Lupin would be declared innocent and cleared of all charges. Harry was feeling very much like throttling Cornelius Fudge.

He put his arms around Ginny and resumed dancing with her a bit stiffly, feeling somewhat distracted by the news report; he watched Ron and Hermione carefully. Ron's face was dark with anger, but also a kind of resignation. When he and Hermione left the drawing room, Harry was worried and followed after a minute, Ginny holding his hand.

To his surprise, he found them in the large entrance hall, standing about six feet apart, doing *kata*. Ron's jaw looked like he was clenching it, but gradually, as he swept his arms in a slow dance identical to Hermione's, lifting his legs in exaggerated kicks and turning with pinpoint precision, he began to relax and the red light left his eye. Finally, he and Hermione finished and closed their eyes, bowing deeply, and Ron looked up and acknowledged Harry's and Ginny's presence for the first time. He seemed *much* calmer.

"You all right, Ron?" Harry asked uncertainly. His best friend nodded, taking a deep breath.

"I'm fine now. There are just times I have to remind myself that I can't stop every idiot in the world from having anti-werewolf prejudices. I'd go mad trying. I'm not going to let it get to me. I used to be one of those idiots after all, and think how thick *my* skull is", he added with a smile. "I never expected to get the Order of Merlin at all, let alone while still a

student. If they don't want to honor a werewolf, there's not much I can do about it."

Harry remembered the unfairness of Ron not being able to play professional Quidditch, and now this. He looked at his best friend grimly, thinking, *But maybe I can do something about it.* He didn't say anything though, not really having any idea how he would push for Ron to be recognized for what he'd done. Hermione looked at him pleadingly and he nodded at her; they seemed to be in agreement that something needed to be done.

"Don't look like that, Harry!" Ron said, slapping him on the back. "Let's all go back to the others. I'm over it, really. It's just a stupid little award. It's not important to me."

But as he watched Ron square his shoulders and walk back to the drawing room with Hermione, he remembered the boy who had looked into the Mirror of Erised and crowed, *"I'm Head Boy!... I'm wearing the badge like Bill used to — and I'm holding the House Cup and the Quidditch Cup — I'm Quidditch captain, too!"*

And yet, Ron was the one who had the strength of mind not to return to the mirror when Harry had not been able to resist. Somehow, Harry had a feeling that if Voldemort had tempted Ron with *his* deepest desire, Ron wouldn't have fallen for it.

He hugged Ginny to him as they returned to the drawing room, and she looked up at him shrewdly. "You have something planned, don't you?" she said softly. He grinned down at her.

"Not exactly. I plan to have something planned. Does that count?"

She kissed his cheek softly. "You're a very good friend, Harry. I do hope Ron appreciates you."

He nodded. "He does. That's why I plan to have a plan. Ron shouldn't be shut out in the cold. I just don't know what the plan *is* yet."

"Well, we'll have to spend some more time dancing. I've heard that helps the thought processes."

He gave her a lopsided smile. "You have?" he asked, holding her more tightly.

"Well, no, but I want you to dance with me some more, so I'm trying to give you a good excuse", she laughed.

Harry would have been content to dance with Ginny all night (and he did indeed have the beginning of a plan in his head after all of the

dancing), but by midnight, Hermione was reminding him, Ron and Ginny that they had to return to Hogwarts in the morning and needed to get some rest. There was some scrambling required for rooms, as the spare room next to George and Angelina's had become a nursery, and the next one over was already being used by Madam Pomfrey, who joined the party briefly, but largely seemed to be wanting to return to the nursery to help Angelina with the babies. Angelina also came downstairs for just a few minutes, looking very tired but happy.

Percy and Katie were in Percy's room, of course, and Sirius and Sam were using Lee's, as he was still on a trip. Fred, grumbling a bit, offered his room to Maggie, trying to ignore that it seemed to be a certainty that Snape would be in there as well. Harry reckoned that he and Ron would share the same room they had when they'd stayed over before the Quidditch match at Hogwarts during the summer, and that Ginny and Hermione would both be in what he thought of as 'his' old room. He wasn't certain where Fred was going to be, as he couldn't picture him sharing with Madam Pomfrey (although the thought made him want to laugh out loud).

Harry and Ginny were standing outside her room and he was pulling her to him, kissing her good night, when he was startled by a finger poking his shoulder. It was Ron. "Don't you think you've done enough of that today?"

Harry raised his eyebrows at him. "Do you think you've snogged Hermione enough today?" he retorted, gesturing at Hermione with his head; she was standing further down the corridor, outside what Harry thought of as Jamie's room, where he and Ron would be sleeping. He looked down at Ginny and sighed, leaning over to kiss her cheek. "I reckon what Ron's trying to say is that it's time to say good night."

She smiled and kissed him lightly on the chin. "Good night, Harry", she said, gently slipping her hands out of his and turning to walk toward Hermione.

"Erm", he began awkwardly. "Where are you going, Ginny? This is your room —"

But then he turned and saw, to his surprise, that a sign had been created and hung on the door; it bore a simple script legend which read, "Harry's Room."

He turned to her, unable to say anything. "But — but you like this room so much —" he started to say. She shook her head, smiling shyly.

"It's your room now, Harry, any time you stay here. It's official."

Harry raised his hand to the simple sign, slowly tracing the letters with his finger, his throat feeling very tight. "Thank you", he said with feeling.

"And *now*", Ron said, clapping a hand onto his shoulder, making him wince; "you won't be wandering into the wrong room in the middle of the night after going to the loo, *will you?*"

Harry laughed. "No, that's true." The girls laughed and said goodnight again from the other end of the corridor before going into the room they were sharing. Just as Harry was about to turn the knob and enter `his' room, another large red-haired figure pushed between him and the door, opening it before he had the chance.

"Awfully good of you to let me stay with you blokes tonight", Fred said cheerfully. He crossed the room and patted the cushioned window-seat. "This'll suit me. I don't need anything more. You two take the bed, I'll be just fine." To Harry's surprise, Fred stretched out on the large window-seat — which actually had room to spare. Harry and Ron smirked at each other. Fred was probably going to want to burn the mattress in his bedroom in the morning, Harry thought, but he didn't dare say anything.

His exhaustion finally catching up with him, Harry lay down on the large bed, closest to the door, and Ron undressed and stretched out on the other half, snoring loudly within seconds, it seemed. Fred was also quickly making very loud buzzing noises (Harry had forgotten how filled with snoring the Burrow had been on summer mornings when he was younger.) But even though he was thinking grumpily that he'd never fall asleep with that racket, he was soon completely unaware of their noise as he drifted into a deep sleep.

* * *

Harry felt the mattress shift as Ron rose; he was vaguely aware of his best friend padding to the door, and hearing the door open and shut. He had started to drift off again when the door opened once more and light footsteps moved toward the bed. Ron laid down again, but he wasn't making the mattress tip quite so much as before. Harry opened his left eye a very small amount, seeing red hair before him. He closed his eyes again.

He wasn't sure how many minutes later it was that he heard a strange whistling sound and his eyes flew open as he realized that when he'd seen the red hair, it had been *long* red hair. He reached out and touched her shoulder.

"Ginny", he whispered. The whistling continued and Harry shook her shoulder slightly. "Ginny", he said a little louder. She rolled onto her back and sleepily opened her eyes. Harry was finding it hard to breathe. He brushed some hair from her eyes and her hand drifted up to his face, brushing over his stubble. He looked into her dark eyes, growing larger and larger as he lowered his face toward hers. She brought her other hand up to the other side of his face, guiding his lips to hers. He let her control the kiss. There was a rushing noise in his ears; she gently opened her mouth and he felt her soft lips under his, her smooth skin under his fingers. He slid his arm around her waist, pulling her closer to him, even though it could never really be close enough.

He couldn't believe they were in bed together at last. Her hands slid down from his face gradually, her fingers moving sinuously, like a slow trickle of water flowing over his shoulders, his arms, his back. As usual, he had gone to bed in nothing but his boxers and Sandy around his left upper arm, although he was also wearing the amulet now. The sensations flowing from her fingers were inflaming him; all of his skin felt extraordinarily sensitive to her touch, and he moved his mouth to her soft neck, stifling his cry of surprise when her slim, agile fingers continued down to the small of his back and then slipped quickly under the fabric of his boxers.

He licked his way up her neck and over her chin, then into her mouth again, and she opened it wide, welcoming him. He shivered under her delicate caresses, which were having a more profound effect upon him than he thought possible. She was barely touching him, her fingers merely making glancing repeated contact with his skin. He moaned into her mouth because of what her hands were doing and brought one of his hands around to her front, covering her right breast through her borrowed night dress; now she was making a gurgling noise in the back of her throat, and he could feel the hard tip under his palm, through the thin fabric.

He lifted his face from hers after delicately kissing her lips, her cheeks, her nose. He gazed into eyes that looked black as a moonless night and whispered, "*I love you, Ginny.*"

"I love you, Harry", she said without hesitation. She kept one hand under the fabric of his boxers, and with the other she pushed between his shoulder blades, gently but insistently, and he lowered his mouth to hers again. Under his hand, he could feel her chest rising and falling more

rapidly; he removed his hand from her breast, causing a small whimper of protest to disappear into his mouth. His hand crept down her stomach to her thighs, then he slowly started pulling up the fabric of the night dress until he could feel her skin beneath his fingers. He moved his hand higher under the fabric, gently tickling, glancing over the surface as she had done with him. He felt her breath catch in her chest, and she tensed up for a moment. Harry hesitated, wondering how mentally ready she was for all this, despite having gone to Madam Pomfrey for the potion.

He moved his hand higher still, very slowly, should she feel compelled to put a stop to it. He would do whatever she wanted; there was never a question of anything else in his mind, even though he was reacting very strongly to both her hands and her reactions to *him*. She tensed up even more and gasped into his mouth. The hand still under his boxers flattened against his skin, her warm palm making him feel that his temperature was skyrocketing. He moved his mouth down her throat at the same time that he moved his hand up; he could feel her shivering under his touch as she whispered his name.

"Oh, Harry..."

He moved his mouth down to the breast that had been ignored previously; he put his mouth against the thin night dress, sending his warm breath through it to her even warmer flesh, as he continued to move his fingers. He could feel her entire body trembling under him, and he tried to concentrate, glancing up at her enraptured face, her eyes closed, wondering whether he'd ever seen her look quite so beautiful...

"SNERT!"

Suddenly, a loud snort met their ears, followed by an even louder buzzing noise. Ginny looked over at the window seat, her eyes very wide. Harry knew from the look on her face that they were both having the same thought at the same time. Pulling themselves into upright positions, they put that thought into words simultaneously as well.

"Fred!"

Harry wasn't sure whether her face was quite that shade of red because of what they'd been doing, or because of what they'd been doing *in the same room with her brother*. His face felt very hot, but it was the only part of him that felt that way now. Fred's snoring was like a very, very cold shower to Harry. Their double shout had apparently penetrated Fred's

sleep-hazed mind, and he blinked and yawned, then shot straight up himself, his eyes open *very* wide now.

"Harry! Ginny!" His mouth was open as well. Harry didn't quite know what to say. Then Fred swallowed and said to her, "Tell me I'm dreaming and you're Ron, not my little sister in bed with Harry."

"Erm, Fred", Ginny began, biting her lip; "you see —"

Fred covered both of his eyes with his hands. "No! *No no no no no!* I definitely do *not* want to see *anything!*"

"Fred!" Ginny implored. "We both have our clothes on!"

Fred peeked out between two fingers. "Harry doesn't!"

"Boxers!" Harry said quickly, moving the sheet out of the way so Fred could see one of the legs; he certainly didn't want Fred to see more than that, as it would have been quite incriminating. "And a snake!" he added, pointing at his arm. "Speaking of which — you couldn't have *said* something, Sandy?" he hissed at her. Ginny had said she'd been so "chatty" while he was gone. She slowly opened her eyes and regarded him sleepily.

"Unlike some people, I speak when I have something to say", she responded, before closing her eyes again.

"Is that *all?*" Fred said indignantly, ignoring Harry and Sandy's hissed exchange. "Oh, then *that's* all right. My sister's wearing an almost transparent night dress", he said, followed by Ginny bring the sheet up to cover her chest; "and *you're* wearing boxers. Oh, well, that's *much better*. *Nothing* could possibly happen under *those* circumstances", he drawled sarcastically.

Still clutching the sheet to her front, Ginny drew herself up, kneeling on the bed, her face reddening with anger now. "Now, you listen to me, Alfred Weasley. Sooner or later *something's* going to happen. You're just going to have to learn to live with it. I'm not a little girl anymore. I love Harry and he loves me."

Fred rolled his eyes. "It's not that — well, it *is* that I don't want to think of my sister in bed with anyone, because that's like — well, eating one of those dung-flavored Bertie Bott's Beans. Only worse. You know what I mean. And I know you're not a little girl. I know Maggie isn't either, but that doesn't mean I want to think about her and Snape in my bed —" Fred made a dreadful face. "Oh, rot. Now I've thought of it. Thanks a lot." Harry laughed, but stifled it quickly when Fred gave him a *look*.

"Can't you at least sleep with a shirt on, Harry?" he grumbled, floundering about for another thing to complain about.

"I never do when I can help it. Feels like I'm being strangled in my sleep." He shrugged, as though this were completely out of his hands.

Fred grimaced. "How did you get in here, anyway?" he asked Ginny. "And where's Ron?"

Ginny raised her eyebrows and looked quite smug. "For your information, this was all Ron's idea. He showed up in our room and booted me out. I asked him, 'What am I supposed to do, get in bed with Harry now?' And he said, 'If you like'. Which rather surprised me, but I didn't argue with him..."

Harry smacked himself on the forehead. "He probably reckoned that with Fred here as a kind of chaperone, nothing was likely to happen..."

Ginny grumbled, "Well, he might have mentioned it to me. I didn't know Fred was sleeping in here, and I didn't notice him when I came in. He'd stopped snoring for a while, I suppose. There's a first time for everything", she added. Fred glowered at her, then stomped to the door, looking very grim.

"Well, there aren't going to be any first times for *you*, at least not tonight", he declared. "I'm going to get Ron back in here."

"I — wouldn't do that if I were you", Harry told him ominously. Fred stopped dead, his hand on the knob.

"Why not?" he asked suspiciously, looking at Harry through narrowed eyes.

"Well, first off, you know his reflexes. If you invade that room quite suddenly, you're taking your life in your hands. Plus, if they're still, erm, *doing* anything, I doubt that Hermione would take it well that you'd be seeing her in that sort of situation, and you'd also be seeing *Ron* in that situation, which —"

"— is the last bloody thing I *ever* want to see", Fred agreed, shuddering.

"Yes, it *would* be the last thing you'd see, once those two got through with you", Ginny added, smirking. Harry laughed, not bothering to stifle it this time, even though Fred glared.

"Come on, Fred. Go back to the window seat. We're just going to go to sleep, no need to worry. You're our chaperone. Ginny's virtue is quite safe", Harry said, trying to reassure him.

Fred slumped back to his makeshift bed. "Yeah, nothing for the pair of *you* to worry about; you can just drop off to sleep, no problem. Me? I won't sleep another wink for the rest of the night." However, he could barely get this out before he was yawning and rubbing his eyes.

"Why not?" Ginny asked.

"You don't think I'm going to sleep on the job, do you? Now I ruddy well have to sit up all night and watch over *you*." He crossed his arms and glared at them. "You see if you like what's in your breakfast tomorrow morning", he mumbled, and Harry remembered that it was never wise to take food from one of the twins, even when they were in a good humor.

"Suit yourself", Harry said, shrugging. "Now that we're both thinking about your being here, sleep is absolutely all we have in mind. That's a guarantee." To emphasize this point, he threw himself back on his pillow and closed his eyes. Ginny curled up next to him on her left side, with her right arm across his chest. He smiled and, eyes still closed, said, "Good night, Ginny."

He felt her press her lips to his shoulder. "Good night, Harry."

There were only a few moments of silence before Fred's voice broke it again. "Look, why don't you sleep on the window seat, Ginny, and I'll take the bed with Harry."

Ginny giggled. "Harry's my boyfriend, Fred. Find your own."

Fred was sputtering now. "That's not what — I was just —"

"*Good night, Fred!*" they chorused. Harry cracked his eyes open, seeing her face very close to his, smiling mischievously. She kissed him quickly and put her head down again. He pulled her to him, his arm around her shoulders, and closed his eyes once more, feeling quite content despite being watched over by Fred Weasley. If, for now, this was what it took for him to be able sleep with Ginny in his arms, he would take it.

* * *

Dumbledore sent horseless carriages to Hog's End to take them back to the castle in the morning. Harry decided it would be wisest to wait to eat breakfast until he was in the Great Hall, well away from Fred Weasley. To his surprise, when he, Hermione and Ron walked into the Great Hall with Sirius, Snape and Maggie, most of the assembled students stood and started cheering, pounding the tables with silverware and making a general ruckus. Dumbledore was back, standing at the head table clapping decorously with the other teachers, who were also standing. Harry saw

Mariah, Millicent and a few other people standing at the Slytherin table, but not Draco Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott or Zabini. Most of the Slytherins who were standing were chanting "*Snape, Snape, Snape...*" as though they needed to show that they were paying tribute to him, not to the others. Obviously, the news of the mission hadn't just been on the wireless, but Harry wished he could see whether the *Prophet* had been more accurate than the report they'd all heard the previous evening. He didn't yet know whether it was just shoddy reporting or the Ministry meddling.

Sirius, Snape and Maggie made their way to the high table and Harry, Ron and Hermione went to the Gryffindor table, Ginny following behind. Once they were actually in reach of the other Gryffindor students, it was something of a free-for-all. Will Flitwick was grinning at Harry and pumping his hand, Dean and Seamus were hugging Ron and Hermione, other students, some of whom Harry only knew by sight were Gryffindors were grabbing his hand and patting his back.

"Please, settle down everyone", Dumbledore said above the din, and, miraculously, they did. He smiled at Harry, Ron and Hermione and waved his hands at Snape, Sirius and Maggie. "I am very pleased that our Head Boy and Girl were successful in their mission, as well as the Gryffindor Quidditch captain", he added, nodding at Ron, "and our Apparition and Potions Masters, as well as Miss Dougherty. I am in communication with the Ministry about when the ceremony will be held to bestow the Order of Merlin upon them, and rest assured that you all will learn of it. That is all I can say for now. I believe we should let them eat their breakfasts now and wait until later", he said firmly, looking over his spectacles at the students, "to pump them for information. Thank you."

He sat again, as did all of the teachers, and a ripple of noise moved across the Great Hall as the students all sat as well. Harry sat next to Ginny, feeling that everything just might be all right. He was back at Hogwarts, which was the first place where he'd ever felt at home in this life, and she was by his side. He'd been incredibly happy to wake up in the place he'd thought of as home in his *other* life, with Ginny in his arms. Everything was coming together, it seemed. Now if only they knew what Lucius Malfoy was up to...

They had Transfiguration after breakfast, and to Harry's surprise, the first thing McGonagall did was to ask him to come to the front of the room. All of the other seventh years were watching and waiting, and Harry

was wondering what he would have to do; he didn't remember what the homework was he should have done, and wouldn't have had any time for it anyway, as he'd been out of the castle all weekend. Swallowing, he hoped he'd be able to convincingly fake it, or at least be able to use his brand new I-was-on-a-mission-with-Dumbledore excuse.

"All right, Potter. Show the other students."

Harry looked at her uncertainly. "Um, show them what, ma'am?"

She raised her eyebrows at him. "Did you fail to read the *Prophet* this morning, Potter?"

Harry was getting a bad feeling about this. She withdrew a copy from her robes and held it out to him.

SAVED BY HARRY POTTER, THE ANIMAGUS: AN AUROR'S STORY

Harry stared at the headline. *Bloody hell*. "I'm sorry, Professor McGonagall", he said softly. "I know I wasn't supposed to let people know until after I took my N.E.W.T.s, but when I proposed my plan for the mission to Professor Dumbledore, he didn't say it would be a problem..."

She nodded. "I understand that", she said too quietly for the other students to hear. "He wanted to get the Aurors back as badly as you did. But now the cat's out of the bag, so to speak", she said, a rare smirk pulling at her mouth. "Time to face the music. No charges will be filed, of course; you had permission to wait to register. But now that everyone in the wizarding world knows you are an Animagus, there isn't much point to putting it off any longer, is there?"

He nodded, understanding her point. "Of course."

"So", she said more loudly again, in his brisk teacher's voice. "Show the other students", she intoned, waving her hand at the dozens of other seventh year students filling the room.

"Show them —?"

"Your Animagus form", she said, as though he were daft.

"Oh! Y — yes. R-right", he stammered out.

"And then you will answer any questions they have."

He looked at her in alarm, then leaned in. "What about Hermione?"

McGonagall spoke softly again. "No one knows about her, and that is how it will stay for now. You decided to let others see that you are an Animagus", she said, as though he had had much choice. "You are on your own, Potter."

He sighed, looking out over the heads of the other students. Suddenly, Draco Malfoy caught his eye. He was glaring coldly back at Harry. Harry forced his eyes away; this wasn't the time to get into a staring contest with Draco Malfoy. He'd no doubt seen him walking up the stairs with his arm around Ginny's shoulder.

He closed his eyes, not trying to rush the Transfiguration, as there was no reason to go quickly. He opened his eyes as his feet were touching down on the floor, making many of the students gasp and back away. He saw that Neville was smirking at Dean and Seamus, who were looking very alarmed to see what appeared to be a full-grown lion before them.

"I knew", he was saying smugly to them. "For years now! He was sleeping that way once, and I —"

But Neville's jaw just hung open and his boasting ceased when Harry spread his wings.

Harry was very glad when the bell rang. As they made their way to Defense Against the Dark Arts, Harry sighed with relief. He planned to sit well to the back of the classroom and take a break after being the center of attention in Transfiguration.

However, it turned out that Mrs. Figg wanted him to spend ninety minutes discussing dementors and the effects of people being kissed by dementors. Hermione started shaking, tears running down her face; Harry knew she was still having trouble coping with feeling responsible for Elliot's death. Harry set his jaw stubbornly.

"I don't think so, Professor Figg", he said to her firmly. "I think Ron and I should take Hermione to the hospital wing", he declared, as Ron helped her to stand and Harry took her arm, helping her to the door. They were surprised when, before they could close the door, Draco Malfoy had run to the front of the room and declared, "I'll help them, Professor Figg."

He had slipped out the door and shut it before she had a chance to object. The three of them glared at him while he smirked at them, looking quite pleased with himself.

"So, ducking out of class by faking a little nervous breakdown at the mention of dementors? Isn't that supposed to be Potter's thing, Granger? Or has Weasley taken to dressing up like a dementor when he wants some from you? That would certainly be enough to put you off dementors —"

Harry wasn't completely certain why she decided to do it, as he only saw how enraged she was for a split second before she abruptly changed into her wolf form and leapt at him. Draco Malfoy's head hit the hard stone flags with a sickening thud and he stared up in wide-eyed horror at the huge grey she-wolf sitting on his chest, snarling at him, a touch of red in her eyes as she snapped her jaws mere millimeters from his nose.

Harry and Ron saw him reaching for his wand, and Ron said, "I wouldn't, if I were you. You'll just set her off. See, when she bonded with some wolves over in America, she really learned how to let go of her human mind and completely take on a wolf mind. She's not really Hermione right now, except that she knows that she hates *you*. You need to behave as though you really do have a murderous wolf on you and make sure you don't antagonize her", he said calmly, while Draco Malfoy shook all over and stared up at Hermione's slavering jaws.

"She — she's an Animagus *too*?" he gasped in horror. "But — what if — if she —"

"Tries to kill rip your throat out?" Harry said casually, twirling his wand as if he hadn't a care in the world. "Oh, I doubt she would actually do that. Well, *probably* not..." he added, meeting Ron's eye, which had a mischievous glint in it.

"Get her off me!" he yelled now as a low growl began emanating from Hermione's throat, her eyes never leaving his.

Harry watched him squirm for a minute more, then said, "That's probably enough, Hermione. We don't want him to soil himself, after all. Think of the smell."

He grunted with pain when Hermione dug her hind paws into his thighs before leaping over his head and landing on the stone floor. She turned around and walked slowly to Harry and Ron, her careful predator's gait as menacing as her relentless gaze. She stood between Harry and Ron, looking balefully at Draco Malfoy as Ron reached down and stroked her shaggy coat.

Harry walked to Draco Malfoy and stood over him. "So — *who's* ducking out of Defense Against the Dark Arts, Malfoy? Get back in there.

Professor Figg may need you to explain what it's like to be initiated as a Death Eater."

He stood, turning pink with anger, brushing down his robes angrily and then taking his wand out of his pocket. "You won't get away with this, Granger", he said ominously, but this time, she used a more traditional approach. She'd reverted to human form in the blink of an eye.

"*Expelliarmus!*" she cried, having whipped out her wand. Draco Malfoy's wand flew out of his hand and he went hurtling backward into a narrow stone niche which might once have held a very long, thin piece of statuary, or a prized lance or pike. Draco Malfoy appeared to be wedged in the small space. Harry had never had a more difficult time restraining his laughter.

He grunted, trying to extricate himself and failing. Hermione carefully placed his wand on the floor about six feet away from him, then stood and crossed her arms, smirking. "Your wand is here whenever you want it, Malfoy. Good luck."

They walked away from him, hearing him grunting and groaning, trying to free himself from the niche. Ron was grinning ear to ear.

"That was fun!" he said. But when they'd turned a corner, Hermione slumped against Harry, and Ron quickly helped support her. "Hermione?" he said gently, looking at her with concern. She raised her eyes to them both.

"I still — I still feel like going to Madam Pomfrey for a little something", she said softly. "I need — I need to feel better for longer than it takes to humiliate Draco Malfoy..."

Ron smiled at her and kissed her brow. "You are rather good at it, you know", he told her, making her smile a little.

"Yes, but — it's not a skill that would have saved Philip Elliot's life", she said quietly. Harry should have known that Hermione would want to know the Auror's full name. He thought of the way Elliot had just stepped off into space again and shivered. Azkaban would never again turn people into quivering bags of bones, huddled in corners, but if the dementors were wandering about in the world at large, people wouldn't need to be in Azkaban to experience this. However, if the Ministry didn't acknowledge that there was a problem and try to do something about it...

"It's just like with the Squibs", he said, thinking aloud. "I remember my mum saying that. The Squibs all just disappeared and no one ever did

anything about it..." He stopped and looked at Ron and Hermione. "You can go with her to see Madam Pomfrey, right?"

Ron frowned. "Well, sure. But where are you going?"

"To see Myrtle. I still haven't asked her about the Squibs."

Ron and Hermione both exchanged knowing glances. "Ah, off to cheat on Ginny?" Ron said merrily.

Harry was also laughing now. "Temporarily, if Myrtle will have me. I wonder whether she's over her disappointment at my having fixed the timelines. And she wasn't thrilled about the time she found me and Hermione —" He stopped, reddening, remembering that the time he was thinking of was the night before Ron's sixteenth birthday, in the prefect's bathroom. He saw that Hermione was also turning a bit pink.

"We'll be off now", she said shortly, her voice a little higher than usual, perhaps hoping that Ron wouldn't pick up on their discomfort. "Good luck with Myrtle."

When he entered Myrtle's bathroom, as it was a very cloudy day out-of-doors, it was rather dark at first before the torches on the walls sprang to life. He didn't hear a sound except for some dripping water in one of the sinks and his own slow, even footsteps. *Is the passage still there that leads to the Chamber?* he wondered. But he knew he had to focus on other things.

"Myrtle!" he called, his voice echoing on the hard surfaces of the bathroom. "Myrtle, it's Harry! Thought I'd stop by for a visit —" Did that sound convincing? How would he get the information he wanted out of her without it seeming like the information was the only reason for his coming?

Suddenly, she came swooping through the door to one of the stalls, stopping and looking enraptured at first, clapping her ghostly hands together and grinning, then doing an excited loop around the room. "You've come! You've come! You've finally come!"

Harry felt his face growing warm. "Yeah, well, I —"

"And just in time for Valentine's, too!" she said, even more rapturously. "Or close enough, at least, as it was just a couple of days ago!"

Harry swallowed. "Erm, right. Well, how've you been?" he asked, feeling awkward. He wasn't all that certain how to chat up girls in general, despite having seen Draco do it a hundred times in his other life (he still didn't understand how his former best friend had that kind of nerve). He

certainly wasn't clear about how he was to chat up a very sensitive ghost who had made no secret of the fact that she fancied him.

"Oh, you know how it is... The older students never come in here, and the occasional first year does something *unforgivably rude*", she said, her voice taking on an angry edge, "which just means I have to *teach them a lesson!*" Her voice rose on a shriek, and she zoomed up to the ceiling, around the perimeter of the room, and back down to the sinks, where she perched on the edge of a basin, suddenly quite composed again. "So I don't get to talk to much of anyone at all..."

"...and you don't get to see people very much, unless you go to the prefects' bathroom", Harry said, smirking at her.

Her jaw dropped and he wondered whether saying this was a mistake. "You haven't *told* anyone about that, have you?" she said, her eyes narrowing and her voice suddenly a low growl. Harry swallowed.

"No, of course not. You — you've got to have your hobbies, after all —" He shut his mouth quickly then, as he wasn't sure this was the right thing to say again.

She looked at him suspiciously, crossing her arms. "Why are you here? Really?"

He drew his lips into a line; "I have to be honest with you, Myrtle. I need some information."

She swooped carelessly about the bathroom, moaning. "And what information would *I* have that *you* could possibly need?"

"Well — it's about my other life", he said slowly. She stopped in mid-air and charged at him, stopping abruptly when she was an inch away from his nose, making him feel like his heart had stopped. She was very close now, and he was shivering violently from the cold emanating from her.

"Yes", she said in a low, angry voice. "I *liked* that world, and *you've* taken that away from me."

"Well, I was wondering", he said, trying to avoid squeaking. "Did you see what happened when Argus Filch disappeared? How did the Death Eaters get into the castle to take him? And what did they do with the Squibs once they had them?" He would have thought that the Death Eaters would have been ordered to kill them, but then that didn't explain why Buttercup was in Azkaban.

She grinned knowingly, flying about his head in dizzying circles. "Ah, *that's* what you want to know. I see. *That's* why you're here."

"Well — well I know how much you adore misery of that sort", he said, trying to make it sound like a compliment. "I *could* have gone to one of the other ghosts... The Grey Lady told me some interesting things..."

"*The Grey Lady!*" Myrtle spat scornfully. "*She* doesn't know anything about anything! *She* never sullies herself by speaking to the likes of *meeeeee*", Myrtle wailed, rushing up to the ceiling and circling about before swooping down and abruptly bringing herself face to face with Harry. "Do you want to know what happened to the Squibs?"

He nodded, biting his lip. "Very much. I would really appreciate it, Myrtle."

She looked smug. "Well, the next time you need information, come to me *first*, not to that full-of-herself Ravenclaw ghost. Not that Ravenclaws know anything about *people*, either. Noses always buried in books", she sniffed.

"Um, Myrtle", he hesitated; "Squibs?"

"Oh, yes. The Squibs. Well, you wanted to know how the Death Eaters got into the castle to get at Filch?" Harry nodded anxiously. She smiled and shook her ghostly head. "*They didn't*", she said mysteriously, clearly enjoying his confused reaction.

Harry frowned. "Did they get him when he was shopping then? Or on holiday?" But the thought of Filch going anywhere on holiday was a very strange one; he tried to picture him at the seaside, or going on long walks in the country to do some bird-watching, or gazing at art in museums. Nothing seemed quite right; as far as he could tell, Filch had only one purpose in life — to terrorize the students of Hogwarts. He couldn't picture him ever leaving the castle.

"No, he was fetched when he was here working at Hogwarts", she said tantalizingly. "But it wasn't Death Eaters who took him." She paused, taking in his shock with evident glee.

"It wasn't Death Eaters?" he said, perplexed. "Is that why they couldn't work out who'd done it? It was someone else entirely? Then who?"

Her smile became more and more wicked. "I remember when they came to arrest you", she said dreamily, floating up above the stalls now. Harry tried to remain patient, but it was difficult. "I remember those two who took you away... the parents of that boy who likes the plants so much..."

"Likes plants? You mean Neville? Oh, right. The Longbottoms arrested me. That's what you remember."

She nodded, sitting comfortably on the ceiling. "The same ones came for *him*."

His face dropped, disappointed. "Oh. So Filch did something to get himself arrested and the Longbottoms came and got him?" He'd been so close. "Drat. I didn't realize that. I had hoped that he'd disappeared in the same way as all of the other Squibs..."

She zoomed down to look him in the eye. "Oh, but he *did*."

He froze. "You mean —" He couldn't process it. "Do you mean that the *Ministry* took the Squibs away? That the Longbottoms just stood there and tried to tell my mum that they cared about finding out what had happened to the Squibs and *they* were what happened to the Squibs?" He realized suddenly that he was shaking with impotent rage; it was truly impotent, though, because he was angry with people who had never done that in this world, people sitting in a mental ward at St. Mungo's, unable to remember anything, including their son's face, for more than a few minutes at a stretch. Then, recalling who the Minister of Magic had been in his other life, he realized that this decision had probably been made by Barty Crouch, who was dead in the world that had come to life again when Harry had fixed the timelines. There was no one to blame, no one against whom to retaliate.

"Where did they take them?"

"Oooh", she said, enjoying making him wait for his information. "I was curious about that too. So I followed Argus very quietly. I reckoned the Ministry would never find out; they only told me that I couldn't haunt Olive Hornby anymore." She sniffed, sounding a bit miffed, but Harry was looking at her attentively, so she continued. "It was a kind of *camp*. Up in the mountains. The Ministry told them it was for their protection."

"Like the werewolf camps!" he cried. "Myrtle! I could kiss you!" He couldn't, of course, but she looked quite pleased that he should say so. "But — do you have any idea how someone who'd been in one of those camps would end up in Azkaban?"

She shrugged. "The same way that anyone ended up there, probably. He must have committed a crime."

Harry paced, wracking his brains. What could Roger Davies's cousin have done? But then he realized he knew. He had probably done what

Harry would do in a similar situation. He looked up at Myrtle. "Did you ever hear of anyone trying to escape from the Squib camp? Did you stick around there for very long?"

"Not *very* long, but now that you mention it, I *did* hear of an attempted escape..."

"And? And? Did the person get sent to Azkaban?"

She shrugged. "I'm sorry, Harry. I don't know. Honestly. I'm not just saying that", she said simply, looking genuinely sad.

But he was grinning ear to ear at her. "I know you'd tell me if you knew for sure, Myrtle", he said warmly. "Thanks so much for everything. You don't know how helpful you've been..."

As he turned to leave, she sighed, "Yes, leave now that you have what you came for..."

He paused at the door and said, "Tell you what, Myrtle. I'll come back later and do some of my homework here. Keep you company some more, all right?"

She rushed at him, stopping abruptly a couple of feet away. "You promise?"

He grinned. "I promise", he said, meaning it, as he wanted to find out whether there were a lot of other things she knew about that other world. He waved to her as he left.

* * *

After telling them what Myrtle had told him about the Squibs, he talked Ginny, Ron and Hermione into coming back to Myrtle's bathroom as well. During much of the week, whenever they weren't in their lessons, Harry was pumping Myrtle for information. He'd never seen her happier, telling of all of the misery from Harry's other life. Ginny tried to keep her distance from Myrtle, who'd been immediately hostile toward her, and she wasn't very friendly toward Hermione, either. She was as pleased to see Ron as she'd been to see Harry (Ron looked rather alarmed at this).

On Saturday Morning, when the post owls came, Hermione opened the copy of the *Times* her parents had sent to her and started perusing it idly, then stopped and frowned, rattling the paper noisily, obviously wanting Ron or Harry to ask her why she was reacting this way.

"All right, Hermione", Harry said with a sigh. "What now?"

"That — that — *witch*. And I don't mean that in a good way. That Harrington-Smyth woman who's the MP from Mole Valley now. She's —

she's *gutting* the national health care system, and everyone else is going along! The Prime Minister is completely behind the plan! Or, I should say, *lack* of plan. This is insane! There's nothing in place as a substitute! Private hospitals wouldn't be able to handle the volume, and what about people like my mum and dad, with their little surgery? How are they going to cope?" She rattled the paper indignantly. "Something has to be done, Harry. Can't Dumbledore get her out of there? Is anyone doing *anything* about her? A witch shouldn't be allowed to interfere in the Muggle government, should she?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't really know that they even know for certain she *is* a witch. I thought some of the operatives were supposed to be working on that. Maybe Sirius knows."

Hermione turned the pages of the *Times*, still furious, and Ron tried to put his arm around her shoulder. "Perhaps we could —" he started to suggest softly. She shook him off irritably.

"Is that all you ever think about, Ron?"

He bristled. "I was *going* to suggest that you could use some kata to calm yourself, but if you're going to be *that* way — "

She relented and calmed down a little. "I'm sorry, Ron. My parents are dentists. This hits very close to home..."

Ron shrugged and took a bite of toast. "Maybe that Rodney Jeffries bloke can just cure all of the Muggles of everything wrong with them and have done with it", he said when he'd swallowed. "Says here in your paper that more people are running off to see him every day..."

"Don't be ridiculous. You have no idea what sweeping changes of this sort are going to *mean*..."

Hermione seemed about to tell them, but suddenly a cry went up from the Slytherin table, and everyone in the hall turned to stare. Mariah Kirkner was standing and holding a piece of parchment that she'd evidently received in the owl post; she looked as though the world had ended. Draco Malfoy ran after her as she dashed from the hall, and Harry instinctively followed; he knew he had to learn what was wrong.

In the entrance hall, Draco had stopped Mariah and was holding her by the shoulders. "Stop it!" he ordered. "Tell me what's wrong!"

She was breathing in quick panting gasps, tears rolling down her face. Then Ginny stepped forward; she, Ron and Hermione had followed Harry

out of the Great Hall. Ginny put her arm around Mariah's shoulders and said gently, "You're among friends, Mariah. Please tell us what's wrong."

Mariah handed her the parchment, and Draco and Harry crowded on either side of her to read it.

My dear sister Mariah,

I am sending this by owl post even though I think you should hear it from me in person. Should I be delayed, I wanted you to know what was happening as soon as possible. To get to the point, our dad is murdered and our mum kidnapped by Lucius Malfoy.

"Oh no!" Harry couldn't help crying. *That's* what Malfoy was up to! He looked at the parchment; it was a very terse letter, but there was more.

You may have felt queer all evening, a bit off. I'll tell you the reason for that when I get there. I should be at Hogwarts by morning. I shall be going to the Ministry first, to talk to some people about getting our mum back. See you soon.

Your brother,

Munro

Just then, the great heavy door slowly opened and a tall man in his twenties entered. They all turned toward him, and Harry saw the immediate reaction from Hermione and Ginny. A handsome man with short, dark hair curling tightly against his head, he was recognizably Mariah's brother, with the same large brown selkie eyes, almost no white around them. He otherwise didn't look especially remarkable to Harry; the girls' reaction to him, however, seemed to be to go weak at the knees; their eyes looked rather glazed over as he strode toward his sister with concern.

"*Mariah!*" he cried, taking his sister in his arms, hugging her quickly. She sobbed on him.

"Munro", she managed to say through her tears, "what *happened?*"

He looked very grim, glancing around at the others. When he met Hermione's and Ginny's eyes, they looked like they just might swoon, and

Harry was feeling more than a little irritated. He could tell that Ron was as well.

"Before you do anything else", he said with an edge to his voice, "could you turn off the selkie charm a bit? You're — distracting them", he said to Munro Kirkner, motioning to Ginny and Hermione, who was gazing at him much as she had gazed at Gilderoy Lockhart in her second year.

He looked up, startled. "Oh, er, sorry." He glanced at his sister. "How many people know about —?"

"They're me frainds, Munro. They *know*."

He looked resigned to this, but not particularly happy. "Waill, thain they can hear what I need t'taill ye." He swallowed, holding her shoulders, shaking a little. "Lucius Malfoy didnae jest kill our dad an' take our mum", he said slowly. "He — he also took yer *skin*."

Mariah cried out and collapsed, and Draco went to her, holding her closely, looking very concerned. Mariah was shaking her head, her eyes so wide Harry could actually see a little white around the darkness.

"No, no, no, no, no..."

Ron frowned, not understanding. "She's more upset about that than her mum being kidnapped, or her dad being murdered?"

Harry drew his lips into a line. "Don't you remember, Ron? If you steal a selkie's skin, you can make her do anything you want." Hermione came to stand with them, putting her arms around Ron's waist; he smoothed her hair affectionately. They were all feeling very shaken.

Harry looked fearfully at Mariah Kirkner, being rocked in Draco Malfoy's arms. Ginny crouched by her side as well, rubbing her back, sympathetic tears running down her face. She had been expecting to be Lucius Malfoy's target, but instead it was Mariah. Harry looked at the three of them, shaking his head.

"Lucius Malfoy was never planning to go after Ginny", he said softly to Hermione and Ron. "We thought he meant *her* when he said he was going to get his son's girlfriend to `do' things for him. Somehow his father must have found out about Mariah; he knew that *she* was his girlfriend now, not Ginny. And somehow he also found out that she's a selkie", he added. He looked at Ron and Hermione, his heart in his throat. As the sound of Mariah Kirkner's keening filled the hall, he heard his own words to Ron echoing in his head:

If you steal a selkie's skin, you can make her do anything you want.

Altar

Ron and Hermione watched Harry pace the length of Sirius' sitting room as Sirius finished writing a letter at a desk tucked into a corner.

"Where are you going to look for him?"

Sirius paused in his writing. "Drat! A blot." He took out his wand to fix it. "I don't know yet, Harry. I'm trying to write to the other operatives, some of whom are in places where they cannot be reached by Floo." He waved his hand at some other rolled bits of parchment on the desk. "So if you don't mind..." Sirius went on writing.

Hermione burrowed into Ron's arms on the couch before the fire, her eyes large and worried. Ron held her tightly as though someone would steal her away next. Harry paced some more.

"What will you do to him when you find him?"

Sirius sighed and looked up at Harry. "That rather depends upon our reception, don't you think?" He bent over the letter again.

Harry frowned. "What's that supposed to mean? If he offers you tea and crumpets everything is okay?"

Sirius sighed again as he put his quill down. "Do you want me to finish writing this letter or not, Harry?"

Harry swallowed. "I'm sorry. It's just that — he can make her do anything he wants with that selkie skin. It's not like someone who's placed under Imperius. You can fight Imperius. This is her *nature*. She can't fight it."

Then he realized that that was exactly why Slytherin chose the curse that he did. It was his revenge. The woman he was going to marry had made him feel that he had no choice but to be in love with her, and when she broke his heart he turned her into a selkie, not just a seal, because if someone else had the skin, *she'd* know what it was like to have to do things against her will, which was how she had made him feel...

He explained this theory to Ron and Hermione. Sirius was thoroughly distracted now. "What are you going on about, Harry?"

"Mariah told Harry the story of how her family was cursed by Salazar Slytherin himself, so that all of the children in each generation are selkies, but only the daughters pass it on... The first one he cursed was his fiancée,

whose twin sister married Godric Gryffindor", Hermione said in a breathless rush.

"They were Muggles", Harry said, nodding. "And after that, Slytherin tried to get the school to stop taking Muggle-borns, and he wasn't thrilled about Gryffindor, either, since his fiancée had fallen for him."

Sirius looked at Harry thoughtfully. "Twin sister married Gryffindor, you say? Muggle?" He stared into space, his quill poised over his parchment. "Hmmm... There's something I read in a book when I was young... Or maybe it was a story my mum told me... I don't remember anything about selkies, but there was something about Gryffindor's wife..."

"Well, Rowena Ravenclaw's son married the sister of Gryffindor's illegitimate son, the one who was born to the other sister. Which means that Mariah's family is descended from one of the founders, Ravenclaw herself."

"Huh", Sirius said, as though he wasn't paying this much heed. "Right. Ravenclaw married a Muggle by the name of — damn, now I can't remember that either..."

Hermione brightened. "Perhaps it's in the library?" She looked anxious for something useful to do. Ron looked sympathetically at her.

"Right. I could help you look for it, if you like", he said quickly.

Sirius signed his letter with a flourish and rolled it up. "If it is, it'll be in the Restricted Section. I think they started that section of the library as far back as when the Founders themselves were still running the school. Their diaries and journals are in there, in addition to early class registers, timetables, you know the sort of thing."

Hermione frowned. "Why would those things be in the Restricted Section? And why didn't they just include all of that information in *Hogwarts, A History*?"

Sirius shook his head. "*Hogwarts, A History* was first written centuries ago, specifically to be a gloss on what really goes on here. It's updated every fifty years or so by someone approved by the school governors to continue to present an impeccable image to the wizarding world. No, the real dirt on the school history has been shunted into the Restricted Section for years, Hermione. Don't trust all of the sanitized claptrap you read in *Hogwarts, A History*."

Hermione looked highly offended. "I know not to do that. I told Harry and Ron *years* ago that it just glossed over the less savory parts of the school's history, in that there's nothing in over a thousand pages about the house elves who've been enslaved here", she said with a sniff.

Ron put his arm around her shoulders. "Well, seeing as we can't get what we need elsewhere, we'll definitely have to check out the Restricted Section." He smiled at her, clearly hoping this would cheer her up.

Instead, she crossed her arms grumpily. "Yes, but even though I'm Head Girl, I don't have *carte blanche* to just skip into the Restricted Section and browse through the stacks for hours on end." Harry wondered how she knew this; had she bothered Madam Pince about this before? He imagined that this would be her ultimate fantasy.

Ron shrugged. "Didn't say you did. Sirius will give you a pass, though, won't you Sirius? You're a teacher", Ron reminded him, raising his eyebrows.

Sirius hesitated a moment, then nodded. "All right." He signed and waved the letter he'd written. "I should get this up to the Owlery before I go."

Hermione had hastily scribbled out a note for her to show Madam Pince; Harry watched her write, *I give Hermione Granger permission to research the marriages of the Founders in the Restricted Section*. She thrust it at him. "I just need your signature."

Sirius glanced at it quickly, then scribbled his name across the bottom. "She'll probably wonder, of course, what the Apparition teacher is doing having you look this up, especially as you have your license and aren't my student anymore, but hopefully she won't think about those things... Well done, though, Hermione. You've made it specific enough that she won't think you're just on a fishing expedition for, say, potions you shouldn't know how to make..."

She went beet red while Sirius winked at her and Harry and Ron laughed, remembering the Polyjuice Potion in their second year. Hermione and Ron left the staff wing to go to the library, and Sirius was about to go back through the tapestry in order to have some school owls deliver his notes, but Harry put his hand on his arm to stop him.

"Sirius — can I ask you something else? Are you going to be leaving the castle at all to see anyone?"

Sirius nodded. "Yes. Some of our operatives are pretending to live as Muggles; I don't want anyone seeing owls flying to their hiding places. Why?"

"Well, if you happen to be down in Surrey, could you — could you find out how my uncle is? Based on the last letter he sent me, I don't think he's getting on very well without Aunt Petunia. When did you see her last?"

Sirius thought about this. "Not too long ago, although obviously before we went to Azkaban. She was all right; very excited about Jeffries' upcoming event. In Muggle villages and especially the larger cities there are notices all over the bollards about it, and in every shop window you can imagine. It's on the radio and telly as well, and in every paper. It's also on our Wireless and in the *Daily Prophet*. Jeffries is all over the international press as well; people will be traveling from around the world for this, wizard and Muggle. It's going to be huge."

Harry frowned. "Doesn't that worry you? It sounds as though it's really getting out of control. That many people in one place, wizards and Muggles mingling..."

Sirius shrugged. "The Ministry doesn't restrict wizards from going to Muggle events, you know, Harry. If wizards want to go see Manchester United play or attend Wimbledon or go to a concert at the Royal Albert Hall, they've every right. The wizards just aren't supposed to let the Muggles see them doing magic. As long as that restriction is observed, there shouldn't be any trouble."

Harry was unconvinced of this, given the way the wizards at the Quidditch World Cup couldn't resist "showing off", as Mr. Weasley liked to put it. He was still troubled. "But what about the Ministry? Do they realize that Jeffries might actually doing magic, of a sort? Does they know that Jeffries seems to have acquired this power from Voldemort, and that he turned my aunt into a witch?"

Sirius put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Now you're onto Jeffries again. I thought you wanted me to check in on your uncle?"

Harry grimaced. "On second thought, he'd probably slam the door in your face." But then he had a thought, and he brightened considerably. "But perhaps you could go to see the vicar, or Dr. Forbes. Or both; if you don't find Dr. Forbes in his surgery, he might be at the vicarage, playing chess with Mr. Babcock. Maybe you can talk one of them into checking on him, making sure he's getting on all right..."

Sirius laughed. "Since when do you care about Vernon Dursley?"

Harry swallowed. "Well, if it weren't for me, he wouldn't be all alone, would he? Without my aunt and Dudley." Harry sighed. "I wonder if this was exactly what he was worried about when I was young, that if they didn't stamp the magic out of me he'd end up alone. I mean, he was always a lot more insistent about it than my aunt. She and Dudley thought he was a complete nutter the way we were driving across the country and backtracking to avoid my Hogwarts letters. And it was his idea to lock me in my room and put bars on the windows, and to tell people that I go to St. Brutus' Center for Incurably Criminal Boys."

Sirius guffawed, but was quelled by a look from Harry. "Sorry. I'll go see your Mr. Babcock and Dr. Forbes, Harry. Perhaps one or both of them can check in on your uncle and make certain he's all right."

After Sirius was gone, Harry walked down the corridor toward Maggie's rooms, where Ginny, Draco Malfoy, Mariah and Munro Kirkner were. Maggie herself was there as well, and Snape, who nodded at Harry when he slipped in the door.

"Sirius has sent letters off to some of the operatives and is going to visit others in person. Lucius Malfoy will be tracked down, don't you worry, Mariah", he tried to reassure her. Draco Malfoy had his arm around her and Mariah's eyes were a bit bloodshot. Snape stepped forward with a steaming goblet and held it out for Mariah.

"Miss Kirkner", he said stiffly, "drink this. It will help you to rest."

She looked up at her head-of-house with a blank expression, then took the goblet and slowly drank it, looking a bit disoriented when she was done. "Oh", she said, putting her hand to her head. "I dinnae know how I'll get back to me dormit'ry..."

Maggie helped her to stand. "You're not going anywhere. I insist that you stay here. You've already missed your morning lessons. Professor Snape's draught will help you to rest. Don't worry — everything will be taken care of —"

Ginny helped her walk Mariah to the bedroom and Harry threw himself into a chair, looking dolefully at Draco Malfoy and Mariah's brother. But it was Snape who spoke.

"Mr. Kirkner", he said slowly to Mariah's brother, sounding more than a little suspicious. "Please tell us precisely what happened."

Munro Kirkner looked very white. "I — I had gone to me favorite pub after wairk." He looked a bit embarrassed. "It's — it's not hard to meet gairls whain —" He hesitated, but Harry nodded. *When you can turn on the selkie charm any time you want*, he thought. Munro had his lips pressed tightly together and continued. "I was at this gairl's flat all night..."

"Where was this?" Snape said suddenly.

"Inverness", Munro answered quickly. "I dinnae want to have to go too far to gait hame in the mornin'." He flushed now. "I'm not the baist at Apparatin'. Passed on me thaird try, but whain I'm knackered..."

Snape waved his hand impatiently. "Yes, yes. When you returned to your parents' home, what did you find?"

His dark eyes looked wet now. "I — I was afraid to go inside. When I arrived in the garden — I usually do that so me mum `n' dad wouldnae bump into me, nor me into thaim — I saw — saw —" He swallowed. "The Dark Mark was over the house." There were all silent, digesting this. After a minute he was finally able to go on. "I — I found me dad just inside the door, daid, with the kist in `is hands, open fer all the wairld t' see..."

Harry frowned. "The what?" he said, perplexed. He noticed that Draco Malfoy *wasn't* looking confused. He hadn't said a thing said since Munro started talking. Something about the word *was* vaguely familiar to Harry. If he had time to think, really think, he could almost remember something from his other life...

Snape looked at them all. "The family treasure chest. *Kist*, from *cistum*. Box." He turned to Munro. "What treasures did your family keep in there? Where was it usually hidden?"

"Under the hearthstone in the kitchen. Our skins used to be in there", he said dully. "All three — Mum's, Mariah's and mine. I asked to take mine oot whain I finished school. I wanted ta be able to keep it with me so I could have it whainaiver I wanted. That made Mum nairvous, but she agreed... An' now I'm glad I did it." He withdrew what looked like a shapeless brown oilskin from inside his robes. "I've still got me skin, but Mariah's is gone, and our mum's too. An while I sat there with me dad, hardly believin' what I was seein', I knew I should go upstairs an' look for me mum, but thain an owl flies into the open door and drops this in me lap..."

He withdrew a parchment from his pocket and handed it to Snape, who read it silently, his eyes darting over the page. He nodded grimly. "Your

mother was kidnapped and Lucius Malfoy took both her selkie skin and your sister's."

Munro Kirkner nodded miserably, his dark eyes hooded. Draco Malfoy squirmed, visibly uncomfortable. Munro looked up at Snape and said, "He knew. About Mariah and our mither", he said, slipping more firmly into the Orkney way of speaking. "Ye can taill from the laitter. Someane told'im." His eyes slid over to Malfoy's face; Draco was squirming even more.

"I didn't tell him!" he said suddenly. "I didn't!"

Harry crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. "Then how did he know?"

Draco Malfoy clamped his mouth shut and wouldn't meet Harry's gaze. Harry looked at Snape, who raised one eyebrow. "I think you should come with me, Mr. Kirkner. Have you been to the Ministry?" Mariah's brother shook his head. "This should be done properly. We will get you an appropriate escort." Snape raised his eyebrow at Harry again, as he led Munro Kirkner out of the room, and he nodded almost imperceptibly at Malfoy. Harry caught on and nodded back.

He turned to Malfoy and surveyed him; he was worrying his robes with his hands, a nervous habit which did *not* make him look cool, calm and collected. "You care about her", he said to him suddenly, making him jerk his head up and glare at Harry.

"Of course I do, you prat. Why do you think I hit you after I saw the pair of you in that big oaf's hut?" he spat at Harry.

"I don't mean Ginny", Harry said quickly, although he was surprised — and more than a little disturbed — that that was the first thing Malfoy thought of. "I meant Mariah. You care about her. You made out that you were basically using her, that she was convenient and willing. But you actually care about her, I can tell." *Even if you don't care as much about her as you do about Ginny.*

"Yeah, I care about her", Malfoy admitted grudgingly. "What of it?"

"Now that *your* dad has killed *her* dad, I think the public relations problems you had with the Weasleys will look like nothing compared to what you're going to have to do to get into the Kirkners' good graces. Especially if anything happens to Mariah's mum. Unless you come clean about being partly responsible, I doubt Mariah will come near you again. If you hadn't told your dad about her being a selkie —"

"*I did not tell my dad!*" he growled at Harry. "Clean out your ears, Potter." He glared at Harry, who didn't back down.

"Oh, really? Well, who *did* you tell, because I doubt that your dad made a trip all the way up to a remote Orkney island just on the off-chance that he'd get a couple of selkie skins and a convenient slave out of it. He *knew*. Who'd you tell, if it wasn't him?"

But Draco Malfoy had his mouth clamped shut again. Ginny emerged from the bedroom, holding the door open slightly. She looked at Draco.

"She's asking for you. Just — be with her. Keep her company. She's still not dropping off; her mind is too restless..."

Draco looked triumphantly at Harry. "You doubt she'll come near me again, do you?"

"She's not going to accuse you right now. She's distraught. But she won't stay that way. You know she's got a temper. When this really hits her — watch out. If you're not part of the solution, she'll consider you to be part of the problem. Don't say I didn't warn you."

"I don't need your warnings, Potter", Malfoy said as he walked to the bedroom.

Ginny looked questioningly at Harry, but he shook his head. *Later*, he mouthed to her, as Malfoy closed the bedroom door behind him.

* * *

On the last Saturday in February, just over a week after Mariah Kirkner's father was murdered and her mother kidnapped, the Order of Merlin medals were to be awarded at the Hogsmeade village hall. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Sirius and Snape were all getting the Order of Merlin, and Ginny secured special permission to go along, ostensibly to see her brother get the highest honor in the wizarding world, making him the first werewolf ever honored in this way. This also meant that she would see Harry get his O.M., second class.

Harry looked out over the crowd filling the village hall. Ron and Hermione sat next to him. Glancing at Ron out of the corner of his eye he could see that he was producing enough perspiration from his brow to turn the Hogwarts lake into a Scottish version of the Dead Sea. Hermione was the color of parchment, and on her other side, Sirius was compulsively twisting his robes in his fingers. Harry swallowed; if anything, looking at the others and seeing their signs of terror had made him more nervous, not less.

Ginny was sitting in the front row with Hagrid and Professor McGonagall, who had turned to beam at him. Harry almost fell off his chair at that sight, hardly a common one, but his gaze was drawn back to Ginny, who was listening attentively to something Hagrid was saying. Some of Hagrid's gruff voice carried above the din of voices echoing in the hall. Harry thought he heard, "...wonder where yer parents learnt it all?" He was evidently regaling her with the tale of the first time he and Harry had met, which made him smile. It was one of his better memories, finding out that he was a wizard, and that he didn't have to live with the Dursleys year round any more, nor go to Stonewall High and wear Dudley's old clothes dyed grey, like elephant skin that had misplaced the elephant.

Harry looked fondly at her and Hagrid, and just then she turned and met his eye. His breath caught; the love and trust he saw there made all of his nerves disappear, and he knew everything was going to be all right. She saw that he was looking right back at her and she smiled. Then he noticed that Maggie, on the other side of Professor McGonagall, was also smiling at someone on the stage. He turned his head, seeing that Snape had met her eye and was letting the corner of his mouth to turn up subtly.

Suddenly, under his robes, Sandy hissed at him, "*The wolf shall howl.*"

Bloody hell, Harry thought. That's just what we all need, for Hermione to be getting up in front of this crowd, making speeches about house elves. And sure enough, while she and Ron were waiting, she was saying something to him about "hundreds of them", and "no choice" and "the Ministry has got to do something." He grimaced, wishing he dared just Apparate out of the hall. He had been looking forward to this, but now...

The ceremony finally officially began; the wizarding anthem was played by a small orchestra while Celestina Warbeck herself sang:

*Witches and wizards all
We do not stand in thrall
To Muggle might.
We, whom they never see
Flying aloft and free,
We ever shall hidden be*

From Muggle sight.

*Not slaves of king or queen
And never clearly seen
By Ministers.
Free to be what we are
Free as a shooting star
All equal and on a par
Brothers and sisters.*

Over a thousand witches and wizards stood respectfully for the anthem, hats off, and sat again afterward. Cornelius Fudge stepped to the podium and began what Harry thought must have been the world's most tedious speech.

"...and in conclusion", Fudge finally said, rifling through his notes, "we are indeed fortunate to have such fine wizards —" Hermione cleared her throat pointedly, but he ignored her and ploughed on; "— standing up to the forces of darkness. I promise you that, just as the Aurors who were thought lost have now been recovered —" *Hmph*, Harry thought, *they weren't all recovered. And some of us didn't think they were lost. Or at least, we didn't give up on them.* "— so shall we soon recapture all of those prisoners who escaped from Azkaban..." *Oh, really?* Harry's mind bashed on. *You can actually promise that? And what about the dementors?*

He didn't hear the rest of what Fudge said. He was startled by the applause ringing through the hall, which baffled Harry, as he could only think that everyone must be as grateful as he was that Fudge had stopped speaking. He joined in automatically, but half-heartedly. To his surprise, Sirius was shaking Fudge's hand while the applause continued. On Sirius' robes the Order of Merlin, third class was gleaming, a bronze image of a wizard's hat bearing various runes and astrological symbols, behind which rose a castle. Most of the applause seemed to come from the Weasleys in the front row, plus Hagrid and Professor McGonagall (and Maggie, who was a Weasley by blood, if not by name). Harry, Ron and Hermione were also clapping as loudly as they could, and Ron was stomping his foot on the wooden stage floor, making Harry's teeth rattle, but he just laughed and

joined in the foot-stomping. He met Sirius' eye as he bowed his head slightly, acknowledging the applause. For the first time, Harry noticed the people ranged around the perimeter of the hall, standing and clapping, and he realized that they were Aurors, and from the look of them, Aurors who'd been rescued from Azkaban. (More than a few of whom had also been rescued from the sea by Sirius and Buckbeak.)

The noise ebbed again and now Fudge was speaking about Hermione. "It now gives me even greater pleasure", he finally said, "to award the Order of Merlin, third class to — Hermione Granger." Hermione was shaking Fudge's hand and wincing as he leaned over to plant a rather damp kiss on her cheek after he'd pinned the bronze emblem to her robes; to Harry's surprise, she didn't seem inclined to make a speech of any kind. Harry clapped more enthusiastically now, hoping that if she changed her mind about speaking, the noise of the clapping would make it impossible for her to be heard.

Hermione sat again, her face glowing, and Ron leaned over to give her a kiss, grinning hugely at her and making her turn deep red, although Harry heard the applause increase noticeably in volume when Ron did this.

There was a buzzing in his head and he realized that Fudge had said, " — the Order of Merlin, second class, to Harry Potter." His name came next in the alphabet, but he still wasn't quite prepared, standing up awkwardly and walking what felt like twenty miles to where Fudge was standing, waiting to pin a silver version of the emblem to his robes. The noise was a bit louder than it had been for Hermione and Sirius, and Harry saw Katie and Percy standing at the edge of the hall, both beaming at him and clapping loudly, while Ron engaged in more foot-stomping and Sirius joined him. As he turned to sit, feeling like his face was flaming, he glanced at Ginny, whose mouth was forming the words *I love you*, even as she continued to clap.

"And now", Fudge said, as the applause finally began to fade, "we have that rarity, an Order of Merlin, first class. For his leadership and bravery, for his level-headed thinking and outstanding ability as a sailor, having brought home to their families both the fine men and women who were taken prisoner at Azkaban and those in the rescue party itself, I award the Order of Merlin, first class to Severus Snape."

The gold version of the emblem was on a wide purple ribbon, and Snape bent to allow Fudge to place it around his neck, where it shone

brightly in the dim hall. The applause was polite, but it didn't satisfy Harry. He stomped as loudly as Ron had done, pounding his heel into the floor, bashing his hands together so hard that they were starting to go numb. Maggie and the Weasleys, Hagrid and Professor McGonagall also joined in very enthusiastic applause for Severus Snape. When he walked past Harry to his seat again, he was actually smiling. Harry caught Ginny's eye again and she grinned at him.

Finally, Fudge stood to announce Ron's award. Harry watched Ron's face as the words echoed around the hall. He seemed very tense, anxiously biting his lip. "— Order of Merlin, second class to Ronald Weasley", Fudge managed to get out, looking like he was going to be ill. The jowls of his pasty face were quivering with indignation, and Harry wondered what Dumbledore had done to browbeat Fudge into giving Ron the O.M., second class. At least Harry hadn't needed to decline his own award, which was what he had been prepared to if the Ministry had overlooked Ron.

Applause began moving through the hall again; Harry and Hermione grinned at each other as they clapped loudly, and Harry saw that Snape was also striking his hands together with a solemnity that bespoke more than doing his duty by Maggie's brother. Ron stood before Fudge now, but he didn't come closer to him as the others had done, to allow him to pin the silver emblem to his robes; instead, he put his hand on Fudge's arm, to stop him trying to lift the medal up, and the applause in the hall petered out as those gathered began muttering in confusion.

Ron cleared his throat, looking more nervous than Harry had ever seen him. "Minister, I'm sorry, but I can't accept this." Harry dropped his jaw and looked at Hermione, who looked as shocked as he felt. Clearly, Ron hadn't warned her about this. And then Harry realized how stupid he'd been to think that 'the wolf' would be Hermione, rather than Ron, the werewolf. The confused murmuring quickly grew to a deafening rumble, and Ron tried to motion to the crowd to quieten again. "I'm sorry, I should explain", he said loudly, his voice carrying easily over the rumble, which again began to subside. "I can't accept this", he said again, his voice ringing out now into the silence, "while Remus Lupin still stands accused of having any part in the Death Eater attack on Azkaban, and while werewolves all over Britain are treated like scum, like worse than scum, like the nasty residue you have to clean out of a cauldron after making a really nasty potion..." Ron paused. "Oh, bugger", he said clearly, the word echoing

across the hall, causing some tittering. He reddened. "Sorry, Mum", he said quickly, glancing down at Molly Weasley.

"That's all right, love", she said stoutly. "You go on." Harry saw how proud she looked.

"I — I'm no good at speaking like this unless I've written it down first", he explained to the hundreds of witches and wizards as he took a parchment out of his pocket, his ears turning red. He cleared his throat and began again. "As I was saying, I can't accept this while an innocent man is being used as a scapegoat", Ron read now from the parchment, "and while werewolves are second-class citizens. We're *people* most of the time, decent people, Muggles and wizards both, and yet the Ministry hasn't done anything to make Wolfsbane Potion universally available to all werewolves. I'm lucky that our Potions Master —" he nodded at Snape, "— is able to brew it, so I can take it every month. And it wasn't Remus Lupin's fault that Professor Snape wasn't around last year to make it for him, and that the place where he was hiding as a wolf was set on fire. He was doing everything he could to avoid hurting someone. Werewolves don't plan to attack people. Remus Lupin didn't want to bite me, but he did it, and since then I've found out a thing or two about how friendly some people in the wizarding world can be", he said bitterly.

"When the Ministry finds out a Muggle has been bitten, you know what they do?" he asked rhetorically, his voice rising; he was hitting his stride, Harry realized, and he watched, fascinated, as his best friend continued. "They basically kidnap them and take them off to be registered. Suddenly these people who didn't even know magic existed and who've just been mauled by what they thought was a wild animal are being told what to do by a government they didn't elect, and *still* can't elect because they're not witches or wizards." Harry digested that; he'd never really thought before about Muggles gaining an entry into the magical world by becoming magical creatures, werewolves. The only problem was that they didn't fully enter into the magical world, they were forced to remain at the perimeter. "And someone like me, or Remus Lupin?" Ron continued. "Do you think people are lining up to give us jobs? I had a job, a good job. I was playing Quidditch for England!"

Some scattered cheering erupted from various spots in the hall, and a particularly loud wizard shouted, "*Best Chaser they've had in years!*"

Ron smiled shyly now, almost as though he just realized what he was *doing*. "Thanks", he said to the Quidditch fans. "But I had to stop, didn't I? It wasn't just because England lost — and I did *not* throw that game!" he exclaimed, as though someone had just accused him. "My best friend", he gestured toward Harry, "just happens to be a brilliant Seeker. He caught the Snitch before our Seeker and Wales won, fair and square. Anyone who says I threw the game is insulting Harry Potter. He didn't need help with anything but staying alive, as a rogue Bludger was coming after him." Harry saw that he'd abandoned his notes. "But did the Department of Magical Games and Sports do anything about that? Not a thing. And did the Ministry go get the Aurors in Azkaban? No, we did. This has gone on long enough!" He turned to Cornelius Fudge. "You need help from everyone who's willing to fight Voldemort", random gasps moved through the hall at the sound of the name, "but you don't seem to get that! I'd never dream of joining him, but if I heard that another wizard werewolf had done it, I wouldn't be at all surprised, the way the Ministry treats werewolves. What have you done to make werewolves feel they owe anything to the Ministry? I'm sick of it, and every werewolf I've met since I registered is sick of it, too", he finished, sounding disgusted. Fudge had backed up against the podium and was visibly shaking.

The hall was utterly silent.

Very slowly, a single pair of hands at the rear of the village hall began clapping slowly. Harry couldn't see who it was; he thought it was coming from a slim hooded figure standing in a far corner, with spectacles glinting from under the hood. Harry stood and started clapping as well, and Hermione sprang to her feet immediately after him. Everyone in the front row was now standing and clapping, the twins and Charlie roaring their approval, while Bill, Maggie and their parents were applauding more sedately. Harry saw that Ginny was crying as she stood clapping, looking at Ron proudly.

Harry stepped forward as the applause grew; he removed his Order of Merlin emblem from his robes and placed it in Fudge's hand, followed by Hermione and Sirius. Finally, giving Harry a solemn nod, Severus Snape stepped forward and took off his Order of Merlin, first class, and handed it to a flabbergasted Cornelius Fudge. The noise in the hall was deafening. Then Harry saw him; Remus Lupin was being led down what passed for a center aisle (although it was crowded with witches and wizards) by

Professor Dumbledore. They climbed the few steps to the stage when they reached the front and Dumbledore quickly subdued the crowd with a gentle wave of his hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am dreadfully sorry that we were delayed in getting back here from the Ministry, but it seems that there is something which you all should know. The Ministry have apprehended eight of the Death Eaters involved in both the Azkaban attack and the siege at Gringotts, and although they did try to implicate Remus Lupin", he said, putting his hand on Remus' shoulder, "it was easily determined that they were all lying, trying to discredit a good man who has worked tirelessly against Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Of course, these Death Eaters knew that the Ministry would be eager to credit their claims that Remus had colluded with them", he said, looking pointedly at Fudge, who was quailing under his gaze; "but I knew better, and now the Ministry does, too."

He looked at Harry, Ron, Hermione, Sirius and Snape. "Goodness, Cornelius, aren't you taking quite a lot of time to give out a handful of awards? May I offer you my assistance?" Fudge nodded dumbly and Dumbledore presented the emblems all over again, first taking Sirius and Hermione's bronze O.M., third class emblems from Fudge's trembling hand, then Harry's silver one, and finally, Snape's gold O.M., first class on the wide purple ribbon and Ron's silver emblem, which he finally allowed Dumbledore to pin to his robes.

"I have brought another award with me from the Ministry", he went on, "one that is a bit overdue, I believe..." He took another wide purple ribbon out of his pocket, another gold Order of Merlin, first class dangling from it. "For your outstanding work in bringing the Gringotts siege to a peaceful conclusion, you were recommended for the Order of Merlin, first class, and now you shall finally have it", he said, smiling at Remus Lupin. He placed the ribbon around Remus' neck, where the shiny purple ribbon and gleaming gold medal caught the light and shone in high contrast to his shabby brown robes.

Dumbledore turned calmly to the assembled company and said, "Go on. You know you want to." He smiled and clapped his hands, turning to look at the six of them. Sirius had caught his old friend in a fierce hug and Ron was grinning ear to ear at his mentor as the cheers and whistles and clapping bounced off the rafters and windows and walls.

At length, it broke up in a most disorganized fashion, with a photographer from the *Daily Prophet* asking them to pose together in a dizzying number of configurations, until Harry couldn't see anything because of the flashes blinding him. He was strongly reminded of having to pose for photos on the day Alicia had married Roger Davies. But although he couldn't see very well, he could hear.

"So", the cold, distinctive voice was saying, "would you say that the Ministry should approve stricter interrogation policies if the words of *eight* prisoners concerning the involvement of a ninth co-conspirator aren't enough?"

He finally reached her through the crowd; she wore sweeping robes of deepest black and her long pale hair was bound up in a twist, secured by a green parrot's feather. She clasped a parchment notebook; a Quick Quotes quill danced over an open page.

He didn't notice to whom she was speaking; instead, he walked straight up to her and said, "Hello, Mrs. Malfoy. Or should I say — Daisy Furuncle?"

She froze, then got that look he remembered, as though she were being forced to smell something putrid. "Worked that out finally, did you?" she said acidly. "Well done", she added, voice dripping with sarcasm, as though a flobberworm that had been dead for two weeks would have known in five seconds.

"I knew about you some time ago. And even though I know you're supposed to ask the questions, I have a question for you: *Where is your husband, Mrs. Malfoy?*"

Her mouth twisted unpleasantly. "I don't know. That's the truth. He's probably assuming that I'm being watched. That's the usual sort of thing, isn't it? The Ministry would be daft if they *didn't* keep an eye on the wife of an escaped convict." She glanced disdainfully at the silver medal on his chest. "Not that the Ministry is displaying an inordinate amount of *sense* these days", she sniffed.

Harry was finding it very difficult not to throttle her. "Not while they don't lock you up, no", he agreed.

She examined him with cold amused eyes. "I've done nothing wrong."

"No?" he said. "Writing lies isn't wrong?"

She laughed. "Truth is in the eye of the beholder", she drawled lazily. "If you'll look at my work, you'll find that it *is* truthful. There are certain

aspects of the truth that some may find distasteful, when given a public airing. Rita taught me that", she said.

He grimaced. "I should have known that you would become friends with Rita Skeeter."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong. We were already friends. She came to me long before my husband went to prison and I lost my home. She wanted to know whether my son ever included interesting information about you in his letters. I suggested that she ask him herself, and she did. It was soon after that Mudblood captured her and Rita was trapped into working for your headmaster that she and I came up with the idea of my succeeding her. She taught me everything she knew about reporting and writing, and even edited my early efforts. It was through her contacts that I landed my first job, after I found myself homeless and without a Knut to my name. They agreed to keep my identity a secret at the *Prophet*; they liked my work, but they were as doubtful as I that the wife of a convicted Death Eater could have her writing received objectively by — certain people."

"Sometimes other people turned in your articles. Was one of them your niece?"

Narcissa Malfoy's mouth curled up at the edge with amusement. "Not quite full marks, but getting closer. Yes, Nita helped me sometimes, when a little bird told me that certain people were watching the *Prophet* offices..."

"She's not on your side anymore, though, is she?"

Narcissa Malfoy no longer looked amused. "No. Incredibly enough, she seems to have forgotten what she was taught about certain *people* when she was growing up." She sounded very, very bitter now. "I have found accommodations elsewhere", she sniffed. "Ungrateful, that's what she is. Everything my husband did to help her in her career..."

"Ungrateful because she's finally thinking for herself?" Harry said, making a face. "Those people she saw at the reservation in Sweden were ruthlessly cut down by the same people who used those dragons to help your husband and others escape from Azkaban."

She lifted her chin and looked at him through narrowed eyes. "You have no proof of that. No one knows where those dragons are."

"The Aurors who were taken prisoner testified that that's what happened!" he said angrily.

"You mean those poor deluded souls who were hallucinating after days and days without food and water?" she said innocently. "Yes, they had some interesting tales to tell..."

"You claim to write the truth, but what you really do is *twist* the truth to fit your own twisted goals", he growled at her. "Just because they hadn't eaten doesn't mean they couldn't remember what they saw. They saw the dragons *before* they'd been without food for days. They saw Death Eaters use the dragons to cart off the dementors. And Percy Weasley himself talked to your husband before he escaped."

"Oh, really? How interesting. You have the most *interesting* version of events that I have heard. Unfortunately", she added, her mouth twisting again, "you do not have a friend in the press who will print your *interesting* version."

"You didn't think they were deluded when some of them told you about my being a golden griffin Animagus. Even though that's true, that sounds a lot more far-fetched than the rest of the truth. But once again, it was something that you were able to twist..."

"Twist? I? I can't be held responsible for what people tell me..."

Harry felt very close to hexing her. "Your husband *will* be caught, Mrs. Malfoy. And if there's any justice, you'll be sent to prison too, for aiding and abetting him." She looked startled for a second, as though Harry had hit the mark, but then she recovered.

"Aiding and abetting? Is that what you call corresponding with my son? And then corresponding with my husband, to tell him how his son is doing? While he was still in prison, of course. I already said that I don't know where he is now. Draco wasn't feeling inclined to write to his father. I felt he had a right to know how he was doing in school..."

"Since when are you and Draco on speaking terms?"

She ignored this. "You may have all day to chit-chat, but I do not. Thanks to *you* I do need to work for a living, so I think I'll just be filing my story about this little travesty —" she said, waving her hand at the hall, "— before my deadline, if you don't mind. Thank you for your time, Minister", she said to the person to whom she'd been speaking before Harry had accosted her. He saw now that it was Cornelius Fudge. In the blink of an eye, she had withdrawn her wand and Disapparated with a *pop*, leaving Harry sputtering at no one. Fudge's eyes wouldn't meet Harry's, and Harry started to move toward him, determined to find out what he'd

told Narcissa Malfoy. But Ginny had finally made her way through the crowd to him, throwing her arms around him; he hugged back half-heartedly and she frowned. Ron and Hermione also made their way toward him.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Hermione wanted to know.

"I was trying to talk to Fudge", he said impatiently, kissing Ginny on the cheek quickly, then whipping his head around; Fudge was gone. Had he Disapparated? He'd once been very friendly with the Malfoys. Harry didn't trust him for a minute, but he wasn't sure who would believe him if he started accusing the Minister of working with Death Eaters.

"Why?" Ron wanted to know.

"I just noticed that Malfoy's mum was talking to him before I started in on her. I told her that I know she's Daisy Furuncle."

Hermione frowned. "Should you have done that, Harry? Wouldn't it be better to let her think you don't know?"

He grimaced and shrugged; Hermione had a point, but it was a bit late for that. "Probably. I didn't think of that. I just — I couldn't *not* tell her off."

Ron nodded. "I don't blame you, Harry. If you told her off, she definitely had it coming."

"How can you say that?" Hermione exclaimed. "After telling *me* not to get on Rita Skeeter's bad side? You were right about that. And then there were the howlers I got..." She shuddered. "I think Harry was very stupid", she declared hotly. "There's no telling what she'll write now."

Harry frowned at her. "Thanks for your support. I can take whatever she can dish out..."

Hermione glared at him. "That's what I thought. And I hadn't got on the bad side of a woman whose husband I sent to prison, and whose son was turned against her."

"I really doubt it would be possible for Mrs. Malfoy to like me *less* than she already does, so I don't see the harm. As for Malfoy, he's been writing to his mum." Suddenly, his eyes widened and he smacked his forehead with the heel of his hand. "That's how his dad knew about Mariah! He must have told his mum, she told his dad..."

Then he noticed that Ginny was glaring at Hermione. "You've got a lot of nerve, calling Harry stupid..."

Hermione glared right back. "Well, I'm not his girlfriend anymore, so I don't have to pretend that I think the sun rises and sets on him..."

"When did you ever?" Harry asked her, feeling rather irritated with both of them.

"Here now, here now", Ron said, gently putting his arms around his sister and his girlfriend. "Let's settle down now, shall we? I know Daisy Narcissa Malfoy Furuncle has got all of our knickers in a twist, but we shouldn't let her bother us..."

"Quite right", Sirius said, appearing at Harry's elbow. "That's for others to worry about."

"You might, for instance, let me worry about it", came a familiar voice at Harry's elbow. He turned and saw the hooded figure that had started the applause for Ron from the rear of the hall. She carefully took down her hood and Harry saw that it was Nita Anderssen. He just realized that the slight lilt in her voice was probably leftover from her childhood in Sweden.

"Let you worry about it?" Ron said, raising his eyebrow. "I thought you weren't on speaking terms with your aunt."

"I'm not. But I could be on lecturing terms, if required", she said, giving him a small smile. Sirius cleared his throat and Ron looked as though he'd awoken from a nap.

"Oh! Sorry, of course. Erm, I told you about Nita, when we were in Sweden, didn't I, Sirius? This is Nita Anderssen, Draco Malfoy's cousin. Nita, this is Sirius Black, Hermione Granger, and my sister, Ginny."

Nita shook Sirius and Hermione's hand in a no-nonsense way, although it seemed to Harry that she hesitated for a moment about Sirius. Ginny had her hand out as well, but suddenly Nita, biting her lip, leaned forward and hugged Ginny briefly. Ginny patted her back awkwardly; Nita stepped back quickly, her cheeks a little pink. "I, er, Ron told me all about you", she said quickly. "You've really stood by him."

Harry frowned; Hermione had stood by him as well, and she wasn't getting any hugs. Ginny's brow was furrowed as she regarded Nita, who suddenly pulled her hood up again, peering around the edge of it warily. "Sorry to be paranoid, but you never know who's watching these days", she said softly.

"Such as —?" Sirius asked her.

"Such as Death Eaters no one knows are Death Eaters. Believe me, the ones the Ministry knows about are only a drop in the bucket. I have to be very careful at work these days. If it weren't for the fact that I went to Durmstrang —"

"You went to Durmstrang!" Sirius exclaimed too loudly. They all shushed him and he looked quite abashed. "Sorry. I mean — I was just wondering — did you study under Karkaroff?"

She nodded. "But he wasn't headmaster until I'd left. I finished school ten years ago, you realize", she added stiffly, as though he was someone else holding her youth against her. To Harry's surprise, Sirius bristled.

"And I finished school twenty years ago, not that it matters... Why were you saying, 'If it weren't for the fact that I went to Durmstrang?'"

She peered around the edge of her hood again, the candlelight glinting off her glasses. "I had to be tough to get through Durmstrang. A lot of students — well, that place can chew you up and spit you out pretty quickly if you're not careful. It's not for the faint of heart." She looked fondly at Ron. "I wanted to congratulate you for your Order of Merlin, and here you must think I'm a great coward for not wanting to be seen..."

Ron shook his head. "No, not after seeing the way things are run at St. Mungo's. I wouldn't be surprised if they held against you that you were cheering for the 'wrong' Quidditch team."

She gave him a rueful half-smile. "Well, my 'wrong' Quidditch team are the League Champions, so I hardly think anyone can hold that against me. But I know what you mean. Yes, every little thing about you is held up to scrutiny right now to determine what side you're on. I don't want the Ministry to think I'm on my uncle's side, but on the other hand..." She looked around furtively again. "There are more than a few of my colleagues who probably *are* on his side, and I don't want them to think that I've lost *all* family loyalty. It wouldn't exactly be safe." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I've been trying to get information that suggests that certain doctors and nurses have been helping wounded Death Eaters. People with loads of *burns*, if you know what I mean."

The missing dragons, Harry thought, his eyes widening.

Sirius looked very keen to hear more. "Have you actually seen anything?"

She shook her head, her lips drawn very thin. "No. But my senior keeps bothering me about whatever it is I did for *you*", she said to Harry,

surprising him. "You know — when you were so miraculously cured of those burns last summer. I keep telling him I didn't do anything, but he seems to think I'm holding something back... It's been more than a little *inconvenient*," she added, giving Harry a hostile glare.

Harry swallowed. "Well, I might as well come clean about that. It was Rodney Jeffries who healed me."

They were all utterly silent for a fully a minute before Nita said, "You mean that Muggle faith-healer?" She looked like that was the last thing she expected. "He's all I've been hearing about for months now. Some of my colleagues have even gone to him. So — he can really *heal*?" she whispered in awe.

Harry nodded. "Evidently. He did it for me, at any rate."

She looked like she needed to sit down, but settled for clutching the back of a chair. "I miss that so much..."

Hermione looked concerned and put her hand on Nita's arm. "What?"

Nita looked at her blankly. "Before I started my formal training at St. Mungo's, I — I could *heal*. Oh, I probably couldn't do what this Jeffries did for *you*", she said to Harry. "But I — I could do more than I can now. It's — it's as if *learning* about the 'proper' ways of doing things has driven the other way out of me..."

Harry spoke very softly to her. "Maybe — maybe you don't believe anymore that you *can* do it. If you did believe — maybe you still could. But *learning* about the 'proper' way, as you call it — perhaps that's keeping you from believing in yourself, in your own abilities. When Jeffries cured me, he told me to believe. I tried and I did — and I was cured..."

She looked at him strangely, not answering, and he couldn't tell what was in her eyes. But he didn't have a chance to work it out, because suddenly, Hermione was prancing about excitedly and clapping her hands together.

"Oh! I've just had the most wonderful idea!" she said. "Sirius, I've been reading in the Muggle papers about this huge gathering that Jeffries is going to be holding. Do you think — do you think Ron and I could go? You know the one. It's a Friday evening, but — but what if he can *cure* Ron?" she said breathlessly.

Ron was clearly alarmed by the idea. Sirius looked back and forth between the two of them; he could see Ron's reaction for himself. "Well,

I'll speak to the headmaster about that. We'll see", he said noncommittally.

"And Harry could visit with his aunt!" Hermione said excitedly, suddenly full of plans. Harry thought about this.

"I would like to make sure she's all right..." he conceded.

"Well", Sirius said, clapping his hands together, "if we do this, one thing I can say is the man certainly knows how to put on a show. You know that, Harry. Whether or not anyone is 'healed'," he said, looking pointedly at Hermione, "if we go, it's probably best to just expect a good show, an interesting time, and nothing more. I wouldn't get your hopes up."

Nita surveyed him, her eyes narrowed behind her glasses. "So you don't think he really heals people?"

Sirius shrugged. "I've been to my share of his shows and seen loads of people who seem to be healed. And they really seem to think they're healed. He makes them happy, and entertains me, certainly. I don't really see any harm in him. He seems to mean well." He sighed. "I'll talk to the headmaster about it, all right? But he may want to be very cautious. Don't get your hopes up." Hermione nodded, but she was still smiling rapturously, her hands clasped together. Harry felt a doubt prickle at the back of his mind, but he didn't say anything; there would be time for that. "At any rate", Sirius was saying to Nita, extending his hand again, "it was very nice to meet you."

Nita shook his hand briskly. "Yes, and you", she said, nodding. She turned to Ron. "And I'll see what I can do about taming my aunt's poison pen", she added with a small smile before taking out her wand and Disapparating with a swift *pop!*

* * *

A week later, the Azkaban rescue and the Order of Merlin ceremony seemed like distant memories. There was no word on Lucius Malfoy, Mrs. Kirkner hadn't turned up, and Mariah was by turns hysterical or confined to the hospital wing in a state of near-catatonia. Ginny was visiting her quite a lot, and frequently came back looking very disturbed, saying that Draco had come to visit, so she thought it best to leave. Her face looked strange when she said this, and Harry wondered what he'd said to her.

He and Ginny sat in chairs near the common room hearth along with Hermione, who was doing N.E.W.T. preparation for Astronomy and trying to interest Harry and Ron in it. Both boys groaned simultaneously.

"I'm never getting a N.E.W.T. in Astronomy, Hermione", Ron informed her, "so I don't see the point of —"

"But look what I've found right here!" she exclaimed, spreading out a wizarding Astronomy magazine on the rug and pointed adamantly at it. "It's not just the N.E.W.T.s that are at stake here. Sinistra has mentioned one or two things about what will be happening in a few weeks, but there's loads that she left out... Haven't you two been paying an attention *at all* in Astronomy?"

Harry and Ron looked at each other and laughed. "And haven't *you* been paying attention to the fact that Harry and I haven't been paying any attention in Astronomy for the last seven years?" Ron said through his laughter. Harry shook his head.

"I still can't find my way around the night sky..."

"Well, you should be particularly interested in this, Harry, because I think some of it pertains to *you*."

He frowned. "What, me *personally*?"

She raised one eyebrow. "Have you forgotten that you and Malfoy are part of a prophecy? And that the Centaurs have been seeing things about you in the stars for a while? Remember your first year?"

"Yeah, but what have we been learning in Astronomy that has to do with that? And isn't this dangerously close to Divination?" he said, smirking.

She pursed her lips together primly, ignoring this. "Starting this year, and every year for the next three years, at the time of the equinoxes and solstices, the earth will be aligned with the center of the galaxy, which only occurs once every six to seven thousand years. And the first equinox is the vernal equinox, the spring equinox. That's when Jeffries is having that big gathering." She dropped her voice. "You know — the one I asked Sirius about going to."

Harry was jolted. "Oh. So you're saying that something significant is supposed to happen that day? The same day we might be going to see Jeffries?"

"Not only that", she said, warming to her subject, "But next Thursday, there's going to be a solar eclipse. It's supposed to take place right in front of Regulus, which is in the center of the constellation of Leo, which is also called the 'Lion's Heart'." She looked triumphant about this, and Harry looked at Ginny, his face feeling warm. "The eclipse is really special

because it's leading up to the galactic alignment. The last one was just prior to the last Age of the Lion, about ten thousand years ago."

Ron was sitting up very straight now, looking at how alarmed Harry was. "That's enough, Hermione", he warned her. Harry felt like there was a block of ice in his stomach, as though he was hurtling forward into something he couldn't stop or control. *The prophecy. It all comes back to that prophecy...*

"No", he said, barely able to make a sound. "I want to know." He looked at Hermione. She nodded, leafing through her Astronomy text.

"The Lion is the galactic pole's guardian", she said, paraphrasing the article. "Regulus is the brightest star in the constellation of Leo and 'key to its mysteries', this says. It's also the only bright star that lies along the path of the Sun as it moves through the zodiac." Hermione looked up. "It should be really interesting seeing the alignment from Stonehenge. I hope there aren't too many people to make it impossible to appreciate... and we might not be able to see it in the day..."

Ron raised his eyebrows. "Stonehenge?"

"Yeah. That's where Jeffries is having that gathering."

Ron snorted. "Oh, that'll be lovely, that will. All of those Muggles showing up who *think* they're witches and wizards. You want to take me to that zoo to be 'cured' by a charlatan?"

Hermione drew her lips into a line. "He healed Harry, remember. And turned his aunt into a witch."

Harry dropped his jaw. "But — but there's people who get really upset when too many people walk all over Stonehenge. You know —"

Hermione nodded. "The National Trust. Yes, normally they take a dim view of really big crowds gathering there. They're expecting between twenty-five and thirty thousand for the summer solstice, which is usually the biggest gathering, because of the sun rising over the heelstone, and Jeffries will probably have a lot more people than that. But I thought I told you what happened? Or weren't you paying attention — *again*?" she said pointedly.

"Erm, what?" Harry said guiltily.

"Parliament has declared that he can have as many people as he wants at Stonehenge. Can you believe it? They've overridden the National Trust. At least he has a lot of followers who are wizards; if people tromp all over the place, they can discreetly put it right again..."

Harry frowned, more disturbed than ever. *Why would Parliament do such a thing?* Unless —

"Did Harrington-Smythe have anything to do with it?" he asked her, but Ron was dragging her to the portrait hole now, grinning.

"Sorry Harry", he said, "but I have declared that she has been working too hard and needs some rest and relaxation now..."

"Yes", Hermione called as they left. "I already told you that she did, Harry. Don't you pay any attention when I'm reading things from the Muggle papers to you at breakfast?"

But he couldn't respond, as she and Ron had both disappeared into the corridor. Hermione hadn't exactly been fighting Ron; she'd practically leaped out at the last moment. Harry sighed, looking across the hearth at Ginny; she looked disgruntled.

"Where are they going?" she wanted to know.

"Probably to Fluffy's old lair", he told her. "Hermione and I used to —"

He stopped himself, his face feeling hot again. Ginny smiled ruefully. "Ah. I see."

He clamped his mouth shut, breathing through his nostrils. He'd been going mad since returning to the castle, thinking about being with her, about the fact that she'd taken the potion, but she seemed to spend all of her time visiting Mariah, or they had Dueling Club, or Quidditch practice, or *something* to occupy their time. This was one of the first times they'd just been sitting about, not doing anything in particular, since returning, and that was only because Ron had 'convinced' Hermione to lay off the N.E.W.T. revision, for the moment. He thought about what Hermione had said about Regulus, the 'heart' of the Lion. "I don't suppose — when they get back, you'd, um, want to —"

Ginny made a face. "I'm sorry, Harry. It's just that — I'm not sure how Ron stands it. Knowing that you and Hermione — that the two of you were together, in the same place —"

He nodded. "I understand. But I doubt Ron has considered that at all." He thought for a minute. "There's that dungeon where we spend the full moon with Ron. I mean, *they've* been there, um, together, but I was never down there with Hermione..."

"A *dungeon*? Not only does my brother not *think*, he —" She stopped abruptly. "I'm sorry, Harry. It's not that I'm saying *you're* not thinking..."

Harry was feeling a little insulted, and a bit like she was being fussy. But then he thought, *A dungeon? How romantic. Just because Ron and Hermione —*

"*You shall see her*", Sandy hissed at him, under his shirt.

"We could go into the corner for now", Ginny suggested softly, nodding across the room; she hadn't noticed that Sandy had spoken. Ginny's words had sent Sandy out of his head. "At least until *they* get back."

Harry dropped his jaw. "The corner?"

She laughed. "Don't be silly! I'm not suggesting — just — well, there are some other things we *can* do... You look like you could use a little rest and relaxation yourself", she added with a wicked smile.

He nodded and tried to smile back. It was something, at least. Now that he was thinking about this — it seemed to be *all* he could think about. "Right, right. Sorry. Being thick."

She rose and held out her hand to him, laughing. "No, you've just got the same thing on your mind all of the time that I have." He swallowed, his pulse quickening upon hearing her say this, following her willingly across the room, the other students ignoring them. *She was thinking about this all of the time?* he thought.

When they reached the corner armchair, which was already facing the two walls, Harry sat down and Ginny draped herself across his lap, putting her arm around his shoulder. "We'll think of something", she whispered. "Maybe you can ask Sirius if I can come to Stonehenge with you and Ron and Hermione..." She traced his cheek with her finger before removing his glasses. He nodded, not interested in *thinking* as he pulled her face down to his, feeling her open her mouth and slide her fingers into his hair. He trembled, loving her so much, wishing Fred hadn't been with them that last night at Hog's End...

He moved his lips down her neck and she nimbly slipped her fingers under his shirt, her palm burning against his skin. Her breathing grew more erratic as he traced his tongue down to her clavicle and moved his hand up her leg. She sighed his name and he covered her mouth with his again, shivering. He didn't know how much longer he could take what they were doing. He was only human...

But she didn't seem to be stopping, and so neither was he — yet. He had slipped his hand into her robes and was cupping one breast through her

blouse, causing her to make an undulating animal noise in the back of her throat. That was almost his undoing; he pulled his mouth away from hers reluctantly, but before he could speak, she was moving her mouth up to his ear, sending an electric jolt through his body and making him momentarily forget how to speak English.

"Mmrrmm — Gin — er — ah — Ginny!" he finally managed to say, breathing with difficulty. She raised her head, fine beads of sweat on her upper lip and a glazed look in her eyes.

"Too much?" she whispered breathily. He nodded vigorously, holding her tightly. "I'm sorry, Harry. I — I want you so much, and —"

"Ginny!" he said again. "Much as it's nice to know that — hearing it actually doesn't help me very much..."

She laughed. "Let's just sit and hold each other", she said, taking her hand from under his shirt. "We'll think of something."

He closed his eyes, holding her tightly, trying to calm down. "I know, I know..." he murmured into her neck, But he wasn't sure he knew anything of the kind. Ginny, however, seemed determined to solve the problem; it was a challenge.

"Yes." She sounded more sure than he felt. "We'll think of something", she repeated. After a little while, she lifted her head and put her mouth near his ear again. "I've just thought of something", she whispered.

He looked at her mischievous face. "What?"

"Well — I've decided that I'm feeling like taking a shower."

He furrowed his brow. "What?" he said again.

She gave him a lopsided smile, putting her hand inside his shirt and bringing out his basilisk pendant. "And you have this convenient little gift I gave you..."

The meaning of what she was saying — and what Sandy had said — finally dawned on him. "Oooh", he said, feeling daft. He swallowed. "Are — are you sure?"

She gave him a very naughty-looking smile. "Well, if I'm inviting you to look, it's hardly wrong for you to do it, right?"

She stood and walked toward the stairs to the girls' dormitories. Harry put his head around the side of the chair, watching her, then sat back in the chair again, holding the amulet tightly, wondering whether this was *really* a good idea. He saw her walking up the winding spiral stairs with a hypnotic slowness that was making him feel like his blood was being

heated in a cauldron. She entered the sixth-year girls' dormitory, where Zoey Russell and Annika Olafsdottir were sitting on the floor, books spread out between them, rolled bits of parchment scattered amongst the books. She walked past them to a corner of the room; he saw her close the hangings on one side of her four-poster, to conceal from her roommates what she was doing. She began to undress slowly, as Harry continued to clutch the amulet, his mouth going dry. When she was undressed down to her underwear, she donned a dressing gown and slippers and padded through the room again, past Zoey and Annika, then across the landing to the shower room, next to the lavatory.

He released the amulet, aware that his breathing had grown rather erratic. Even though she'd virtually given him a written invitation, he still wasn't completely sure he should be doing this. He sat, staring into the corner, trying to work out whether he should or shouldn't touch the amulet again, when he found that his hand had already crept toward it and he was clasping it firmly once more, unable to resist doing this.

He gasped; he wasn't sure how many minutes had gone by since he'd let go of the amulet, but Ginny had completely disrobed and was standing under the shower spray. Harry felt like he was holding his breath; she was so beautiful, and not at all like the too-thin Ginny in his other life. He had seen the way she ate after going on morning runs; she had a healthy appetite, and it showed. She looked strong and solid, not like she would break if bent too far, and he was starting to wish they'd snuck down to the girls' prefects bathroom, so they could do this together (although at this hour they'd be risking someone else intruding upon them, and it was another place where he'd been with Hermione). The water cascaded over her body as she tipped her head back, wetting her hair, and he felt that he'd been incredibly stupid for not having done this before, and wondered how many times Draco Malfoy *had* done it, without being specifically invited.

He watched her wash her hair, wishing those were his hands sinking into the red tresses, washing it for her, watching the soap run down her body, caressing her curves, starting to make him feel like he was going mad...

"Harry?"

He screamed without meaning to, releasing the amulet, and staring around wildly. Neville was standing over him, looking concerned.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

"Erm, what? What is it, Neville?" he sputtered.

"You were over here making very odd noises. I thought Ginny was still with you", he added, turning deep red, "but then I remembered seeing her go upstairs. Are you sick?"

Harry wondered whether his thoughts were *very* obvious; he fought the urge to move his hand to cover the evidence. "No, I'm fine. I just — think I'll go have a lie-down..."

"Okay, Harry. As long as you're all right..."

Harry bolted for the stairs and skipped every other step on his way up to the top of the tower. He clasped the amulet again when he reached the top, panting, and the sight of Ginny made it completely impossible for him to consider releasing the amulet again. He opened the door and immediately ploughed into Dean and Seamus, sitting on the floor, building a card castle with a pack of Exploding Snap cards. Most of it blew up in their faces.

They waved their arms to dispel the smoke, coughing. "Damn, you, Harry!" Dean choked. "Look what you've gone and done."

Seamus was examining his singed hair in the mirror on the nearest wardrobe door. The mirror was jeering at him and starting to say a rude limerick. "Look what you've done to me, Harry! You wanker!"

Harry sped from the room again, still clutching the amulet and thinking, *Yeah, Seamus, that's about right*. All thoughts of prophecies, Stonehenge and Rodney Jeffries fled his brain as he bolted for the lavatory on the other side of the landing and locked the door securely behind him.

* * *

A few days later, Harry and Ginny were sitting next to each other at the Gryffindor table, eating lunch, when Ginny whispered to him out of the corner of her mouth, "*I'm finished. I'm going up to the library. Follow me in a few minutes. I need to talk to you.*"

He had watched her take another shower the day before, but he wanted to be *in* the same room with her... it was driving him mad. He hoped she'd come up with a solution; he'd suggested the Muggle Studies classroom, where they'd met in his other life, but she'd told him that room was locked with a password now. When he reached the library, he found her at a table in the rear, far from Madam Pince's desk. As the rest of the school were still eating lunch, the library was deserted. "What is it?" he asked anxiously.

"I've talked to Maggie about our situation, and she said we could use *her* rooms", she whispered. "Isn't that perfect? Especially since it means that we could actually spend the night together, instead of just rushing out of there again. This way we don't have to wait for the trip to Stonehenge." They'd received permission to go, accompanied by Sirius, Remus, Maggie and Snape. She smiled sweetly at him. "I did like sleeping next to you, though, in your old room. Even with Fred there."

Harry gazed into her eyes and ran his hand up her arm. "I did, too. That would be brilliant, to not have to run off. But — where will Maggie be?"

Ginny smirked. "Maggie hasn't actually slept in her own bed for ages, if you get my meaning..."

Harry shook his head. "Well, there goes that theory."

She frowned. "What theory?"

"Well, erm", he hedged, wishing he hadn't brought it up. She nodded with understanding.

"You mean the theory that Professor Snape needed regular shagging to be a nice person."

He covered her mouth with his hand. "Ginny! You shouldn't —"

She grinned against his hand, then kissed his palm and slowly ran her tongue along his life-line, making him gasp and pull his hand away again. She was still grinning wickedly when he could see her mouth again. "I was saying what you were thinking. And he *is* happier. You can see it if you look. But he has his reputation to maintain. Now — he seems to be *forcing* the nastiness a bit, don't you think? When he gives detentions, it seems that his heart isn't really in it. I do hope they wait to get married, though. It's selfish of me, but I think it would be odd next year to be calling my brother-in-law 'Professor Snape'."

Harry's jaw dropped. "You think they're going to get married?"

Ginny nodded. "He's already asked her, actually. She said it was the night they spent in Fred's room at Hog's End." She laughed. "Don't tell Fred. He'd never get over it."

Harry laughed too. "I wouldn't dream of it. So they're keeping quiet about it for now?"

"Yes. Maggie said she was just telling me, but she said it was okay for me to tell you. Ron doesn't even know, or Hermione. They'll go public eventually, but for now —"

"— for now they're living in his quarters and not letting on that she's not using hers."

Ginny nodded. "Right. Which leaves Maggie's rooms empty and available..."

"*And* I know the staff wing password, so it's just a matter of working out a time."

She pulled out a parchment with the patrol schedule on it. "Exactly. That's why I have this. We need to know what we're doing." They pored over it together; Harry kissed her on the cheek, grinning at her, and she grinned back, then bent over the parchment, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear, which was somehow very distracting to Harry. "Okay, now, we're on duty together during the second shift on Sunday", she began; "after our shift is over, we could just go to the staff wing and spend the rest of the night there."

Harry stared at it. "We'd have to avoid Mrs. Figg — I mean, Professor Figg — returning after her shift. She's on with us. Not to mention — won't Ron wonder where I am in the morning? And I'm not sure it's a good idea for me to miss sleep on Sunday night; I have McGonagall first on Monday. She's hard to take with a full eight hours."

She frowned. "Good point. Oh, wait — don't you have Friday morning free?"

"Yeah, I do", he said, catching on, perusing the schedule for Thursday. "Oh, and this is perfect! You're on the first shift Thursday and I'm on the second, with Hermione. We can get her help with Ron. Let's see — you can use my Invisibility Cloak to go through the corridors safely and I can go right to the staff wing after I'm done. Hermione will help us, I know she will; if Ron has questions about where I am during the night or in the morning, she can tell him I agreed to fill in for someone else. And let's see... The staff on the second shift are Flitwick and Hagrid. Hagrid goes back to his hut, and Flitwick isn't difficult. I'll just walk upstairs slowly; he goes amazingly fast; he'll be back in the staff wing in a blink, certainly by the time I get there. You meet me there in the Cloak and I'll let us in."

"And on Friday morning, we'll just make sure we get out of the staff wing before Trelawney and Vector get back from their shift."

He nodded. "We can share the Cloak to get back to Gryffindor Tower. None of the prefects on that shift are Gryffindors, so we won't run into any of *them*."

They looked at each other, grinning. It was the perfect plan. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly as the bell marking the end of lunch sounded. "I love you. See you later", she said, turning to dash out of the library.

He watched her go, still grinning uncontrollably. *It was perfect.*

* * *

"*A surprise will sprout up unexpectedly.*"

Harry resisted the urge to criticize Sandy's choice of words. *When is a surprise not unexpected?* he thought. But he pretended he hadn't even heard. He wasn't sure he liked the sound of it, at any rate, and he didn't want to get into a long hissed conversation by asking Sandy what she meant. She probably wouldn't be able to tell him anyway.

He wished he knew how to perform Dumbledore's Chameleon Transfiguration. He pressed himself up against a stone wall, his heartbeat like a bass drum in his head. He hoped Ginny was all right; he was glad she had the Invisibility Cloak. At least he knew she couldn't be seen by any of the staff or prefects patrolling the corridors. He waited for footsteps to pass; Mandy Brocklehurst and Darren Ellerby, who'd been appointed to take Evan Davies' place as the seventh-year Ravenclaw prefect, were moving with maddening slowness. He hoped that the surprise was a *good* one. Surprises could cut both ways.

Finally, he reached the tapestry hiding the entrance to the staff wing. He whispered the password to the wall, then looked over his shoulder at the corridor, whispering, "Are you here yet, Ginny?" He started to reach for his amulet, fumbling in his robes for it so he could see her. "We need to hurry before someone co —" He felt someone's eyes on him, but it wasn't Ginny's eyes. He turned slowly; on his other side stood Professor Sprout, who was evidently returning to the staff wing. He was tempted to just run like the wind, but he swallowed and tried to maintain his composure. "Erm, hullo, Professor Sprout..." he began, not sure what to say next. He stopped trying to reach the basilisk amulet.

Her mouth was very thin and her normally mild eyes were blazing as he let the tapestry fall. "I am returning from greenhouse number six to see to the *Erechtheus dracunculoides giganthos*", she said with a sniff. "What is *your* excuse for being out of your house? I know the patrol schedule, Potter, and you are not on this shift. And even if you were, you should not be patrolling without a partner, *plus* the interior of the staff wing is *not* on

the approved list of areas of the castle to patrol — for students, at any rate. The staff wing is to provide a haven for *the staff*", she said pointedly. "And did I hear you say the name `Ginny?' Would that be Ginny Weasley?" She blanched and put her hand over her chest, looking faint. "Are you — are you and she — *meeting* in a teacher's quarters while they are out patrolling the school to keep *you* safe?"

Harry's mouth worked without a noise emerging. To make it worse, a silky voice behind him said, "Yes, Potter. Please explain yourself. Are you so unconcerned about your academic career that you are arranging assignments in the middle of the night in the *staff wing*?" He turned to find Snape regarding him with one of his nastier expressions. Professor Sinistra was with him, looking more alert than most people who patrolled in the dead of night, as she slept during the day and got up after dark to teach Astronomy.

Harry was feeling grumpy about being called up on the carpet by Snape, given what he knew about his relationship with Maggie. *Considering that you've proposed marriage to one of your students, you can hardly talk. Even if she is in her twenties...* He didn't dare speak, though, regardless of the acid remarks leaping to his tongue. Or *especially* considering the thoughts he longed to say, and there was also the fact that he wasn't supposed to know about the proposal. Harry swallowed, suddenly very glad that Ginny didn't seem to be about; she must have had a hard time getting past some other patrollers.

"Well, um, yes", he said to Professor Sprout. "I tried to convince Ginny to meet me here, but I can see she had the sense not to do it. I'm sorry. It was stupid and thoughtless. You're quite right. I'll just be going back to Gryffindor Tower", he said, turning.

"Not so fast, Potter", Snape said smoothly, putting a hand on his shoulder. Even Sinistra was looking disapprovingly at him, her arms crossed on her chest. Harry wondered whether Maggie had told Snape about the plan. "I believe that, along with that night that you claimed that Mr. Malfoy and Miss Kirkner had drowned in the lake", he said, his mouth twisting with what passed for amusement for him, "this would make your *second* time being out-of-bounds after hours for *no good reason*. Please tell me if I am mistaken", he added, crossing his arms and staring down his nose at Harry,

Harry forced himself to look him in the eye. "No, sir", he said. "You are not mistaken."

Snape's eyebrows flew up. "You admit then that you have no legitimate reason for being out of your house at —" he checked his pocket watch; "—two-fifteen, which would make this your *second* infraction. If you recall, Potter, the headmaster was very clear in September that the first infraction would warrant *three* detentions, which you served with me", he added. Harry knew, of course, that Snape knew that he had a perfectly good reason for thinking that Draco and Mariah had drowned, but Professors Sprout and Sinistra did not know this. "The headmaster was also very clear that the second infraction would mean —" he said, inclining his head toward Harry, waiting for him to answer.

No, Harry thought. He wouldn't. He won't. He — *would he?*

Harry didn't say anything, his mouth hanging open in shock, so Snape finished his own sentence: "Suspension, Potter", he said, as though relishing every syllable.

Harry couldn't keep the distress from showing on his face. "*Suspension?* But sir —"

"Unless you have a legitimate reason to present to explain why you are out-of-bounds —"

"I put him up to it!" Ginny said suddenly, coming round the corner, her robes and hair flying out behind her. All three professors were startled to see her. Harry felt his stomach drop into his shoes, and Professor Sprout looked faint again.

"Miss Weasley! Well! I never!"

"Well, I do, Professor Sprout!" she said stoutly. "Don't you remember catching me in the greenhouse with Draco Malfoy last year?" Sprout clutched at the wall for support.

"Ginny!" Harry hissed at her. "You shouldn't —"

"What? Tell the truth?"

"Um, Ginny", he hissed at her, "you and Malfoy *didn't* do that, so why are you —"

"That's right!" Ginny said loudly, drowning him out and looking squarely at Professor Sprout. "I'm a — a — scarlet woman!" she said with some hesitancy, perhaps thinking about how all of this would sound to her mother, Harry thought. Then he shuddered to think what Molly Weasley would think of *him*. He thought he'd much rather be suspended from

school than face Ginny's mother on charges of attempting to seduce her baby girl.

Harry covered his face with his hands; peering between his fingers he saw that Snape had an evil-looking half-smile. *Oh, you're just enjoying this to pieces. Harry Potter, Head Boy, suspended for sneaking into the staff wing with his girlfriend. Brilliant.*

"Well, Miss Weasley, you may be whatever color of the rainbow you choose, but you *cannot* do it outside of your house after nine o'clock at night. As this is your first infraction you will serve three detentions. With, I should think, Professor Sprout", he said, nodding to his colleague, who was surveying Ginny with tight-lipped disapproval. Ginny looked more than a little cowed by this prospect.

"As for what to do with the two of you tonight, Professor Sinistra and I will escort you both back to Gryffindor Tower. After that we will inform Professor McGonagall of what has occurred here." He bowed slightly to Professor Sprout. "I expect you are tired from your greenhouse duties, Professor. You will be wanting to go to your rooms..."

She nodded to him, patting her hair, still appearing quite flustered. "Yes, Professor. Thank you for taking care of this." She surveyed Ginny with a gimlet eye. "I'll see you for detention at seven o'clock sharp tomorrow morning, my girl", she said to Ginny.

Her jaw dropped. "Detention in the *morning*!"

"Until nine o'clock", Professor Sprout pronounced.

Harry protested, "But we usually go running at that time. And she'll miss breakfast!"

"Well, she should have thought of that before planning this little tryst with *you*, shouldn't she?" Professor Sprout sniffed. She glared at Ginny. "Seven o'clock sharp, down at the greenhouses", she intoned before turning and entering the staff wing. A very subdued Harry and Ginny followed Snape and Sinistra through the corridors, sneaking glances at each other periodically. Harry longed to reach out and take her hand; she really had been magnificent. She could have got away without getting into any trouble at all. He was glad that this was her first time being caught out-of-bounds, so she wouldn't be suspended. Mrs. Weasley might not hear about Ginny's detentions with Professor Sprout, but if Ginny were sent home to the Burrow, the reason for it would be bound to come out.

When they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, Harry gave the password and started to follow Ginny into the common room; Snape detained him. "Go ahead, Miss Weasley. Professor Sinistra will escort you up to your dormitory." He nodded to his colleague. "I need to discuss Mr. Potter's suspension with him."

Ginny gave him a sympathetic smile as she entered Gryffindor Tower, followed by Sinistra. Harry turned to Snape, *not* feeling that there was a particular resemblance between him and his old dad at this moment. This Snape was behaving far too much like the one who'd spent Harry's first year making his life a misery. And second year. And third year...

"You will report to the entrance hall with your luggage at seven o'clock sharp, Potter", he said in a quietly ominous voice. "I will accompany you to the village hall, along with another operative, where you can Apparate to my uncle's apothecary in Dunoon. It is no longer possible to Apparate in and out of Ascog Castle, and the fireplaces can only be used to communicate. There has been a security lockdown there in anticipation of your arrival..."

Harry frowned. "What? *In anticipation?*"

Snape sighed. "Use your head, Potter. No progress has been made in finding Lucius Malfoy for the last three weeks. With Draco Malfoy living here, as well as Miss Kirkner, whose selkie skin is in Malfoy's possession, it is generally agreed that Hogwarts castle is no longer the safest place for you. I have been finding it extremely tedious to keep track of you during this time", he said, sounding quite irritated, and Harry dropped his jaw. He'd been *spying* on him! Snape ignored his reaction. "Malfoy has managed to infiltrate the school before. We are taking every precaution to prevent him from doing this again, but the headmaster agrees that it would be prudent to also remove you from the premises, without making it seem planned. You will be permitted to continue with your studies while you are away for a fortnight, by which time we will hopefully have Malfoy in custody." He looked amused now as he said to Harry, "Luckily, young people have *rather* predictable hormonal urges... Oh, and hand over the map."

Harry wanted to say a thing or two about Snape's own "hormonal urges", but he instinctively put his hand over his pocket. He tried to make this seem innocent. "What map?" Did he sound unconcerned about it? he wondered. "And what are you saying? Was — was all of this a *set up?*" he

demanded, incredulous. Was even *Dumbledore* in on it? He was unpleasantly reminded of when he'd gone on trial for causing his mother's death, in his other life...

Snape peered at him. "Miss Dougherty told me what her sister asked of her. I had already expressed my concerns to her and the headmaster that if Lucius Malfoy found a way to influence or control Draco Malfoy or Mariah Kirkner, you could be in danger, especially if Malfoy managed to deliver his son to the Dark Lord, who could bend him to his will. We still need to be concerned about that Obedience Charm. After I spoke to the headmaster we both agreed that if you were suspended it would be an excellent cover story to explain your leaving the castle, to avoid there being any appearance of paranoia concerning Mr. Malfoy's and Miss Kirkner's presence here. Miss Dougherty provided the perfect means to accomplish that, and she is hopeful that her sister will forgive her quickly, as the goal was to keep you safe. If you hadn't been *planning* to be out-of-bounds, we would have needed to invent a reason, so for once your predilection for rule-breaking is *useful*", he said dryly, raising one eyebrow. "You will be safe at Ascog; during the interim we can monitor Mr. Malfoy and Miss Kirkner, as well as continuing to try to locate the elder Mr. Malfoy. Several operatives will be living with you at Ascog, and the concealment spells have been altered so that even magical people can no longer see the castle. It will appear, to Muggles and magical folk alike, to be an abandoned old wreck, just the shell of a centuries-old tower house on the edge of the loch. The only way anyone can find it is if the Secret Keeper divulges the location to them."

Harry was shocked. "Secret Keeper! Who's the Secret Keeper?"

Snape's mouth had gone very thin. "Never mind. I've said too much. Professor Sinistra will be back any moment. Be in the entrance hall at seven o'clock. Now, I'll say it again: hand over the map. We need it to keep track of Mr. Malfoy and Miss Kirkner. They are members of my house; I have a right to do this. Surely even *you* cannot object."

Harry grimaced as he removed the map from his pocket. "Here", he said reluctantly. "To activate it you say, *I solemnly swear that I am up to no good*. To deactivate it you say, *Mischief managed*."

Snape's mouth was twisting again. "How — like your father and his friends", he said sardonically, forcing Harry to bite back a retort. Snape

pocketed the parchment. "Goodnight, Potter." He nodded at Harry, who began to climb into the common room.

"Good night", Harry said, feeling more than a little irritated. He didn't add a "sir" this time. Professor Sinistra appeared and climbed out of the portrait hole, a distinct look of disapproval in her dark eyes.

He felt betrayed. Had Ginny had a part in it? He didn't think so; Snape had said it was Maggie who'd told him. He was seething in general now, and stomped across the common room to the stairs, feeling like he wouldn't sleep at all, he was so angry. He understood that it was for his safety, but that didn't make him feel any better about it all. He'd been wanted to spend the night with Ginny, not with a proper snit and a general feeling of discontent. Knowing that Snape was going back to the staff wing, where Maggie was waiting for him, only made matters worse. He spent a good deal of time punching his pillow into shape before finally attempting to sleep, imagining, with each blow, that the pillow was Severus Snape.

* * *

When Harry, Snape and Mundungus Fletcher, who'd accompanied them, reached the village hall the next morning, Harry had turned to Snape and said bitterly, "I reckon this means that I can't go to see my aunt on the twentieth of March, now. Sirius was going to ask Professor Dumbledore for permission for me to do that, but now that'll be my first day back, after my suspension."

Snape's eyes betrayed no emotion. "I am aware of that arrangement, and on the contrary — it will be a further excuse for you to be away from the castle. We will not tell anyone that you are going, naturally. And everyone involved will be disguised. But that has not been canceled. I will also be with you." Harry nodded; that was something, at least. He'd be able to see Ron and Hermione again, and maybe even spend the night with Ginny, if Ron didn't interfere.

Even though his suspension was essentially a ruse, Harry felt more than a little abashed when Sirius' mother met him at the harbor where Duncan MacDermid had tied up the yacht he used to get them down to the Isle of Bute from Dunoon. (It was a borrowed vessel, as the *Patricia* was being given a much-deserved rest, and they didn't want anyone recognizing their craft.) When Harry had Apparated to the apothecary shop with Fletcher, Snape's uncle had greeted him tersely, his mouth drawn into

a grim line; Remus Lupin was already there, waiting for them. Harry had had to leave Sandy behind with Ron, but Remus said that he'd probably be able to fetch her for him within a couple of days; he needed to go to Hogwarts to have a meeting with Dumbledore and Sirius concerning the Lucius Malfoy situation, and Remus said he might also come to Stonehenge with them.

Remus was at least a bit friendly upon seeing Harry (friendlier than Harry's sixth-year Potions Master), but he also looked a bit distracted. Initially, he told Harry to remain belowdecks during the short trip down the Firth of Clyde, but he reminded him that MacDermid would probably need his help. Finally, Harry switched clothes with Remus, who stayed as close as possible to Harry without getting underfoot. Fletcher, for his part, spent the time spewing over the side. Remus also looked green from time to time.

Sirius' mother was silent while driving him, Remus and Fletcher to Ascog Cottage, though which they all had to enter Ascog Castle. When they had drawn near to the castle, Harry got quite a shock, even though he'd been warned about it. He could no longer see it as it really was, a rebuilt tower house reaching up to the sky; he saw instead a ruin with partial walls around its square foundations, the grey late-winter sky not the least bit obscured by the crumbling carcass. He swallowed, but Sirius' mother seemed cheerful enough as she drove, so he tried to remain calm and remember the house as he'd last seen it.

When he'd reached the Hogwarts entrance hall that morning, to his surprise, Snape had told him where to find the Black house; Harry wondered why on earth he would do such a thing, but then Harry had realized *He's the Secret Keeper*. Of all people to be protecting the Black house! Harry hadn't thanked him. He didn't speak during the entire time they were walking to the village hall. He was more than a little cross with Severus Snape for his part in setting him up to be suspended. He wasn't interested in pretending to be all right about it, plus he'd given Harry a long essay to write while he was suspended.

After four days at Ascog, Harry was pacing his room, feeling like a caged animal, even though he knew that he had the run of the house. He'd gone down to the pool every day, which helped relax him a little, and he'd written some letters to Ginny, Ron and Hermione, which the Blacks' owl had delivered for him (he'd left Hedwig at Hogwarts), but he was still

feeling at loose ends. He could work on Snape's essay, and another for McGonagall, but he wasn't feeling very motivated. Finally, he decided to explore; he'd never taken the time to get to know Ascog. He couldn't run around the loch and didn't have lessons, Quidditch or trying to sneak off with Ginny to occupy him, so he thought he might as well learn more about the Black home, which was also his home now.

Sirius' room shared the top floor with his bedroom; there wasn't much to see, but on the wall above the desk Harry noticed a familiar photograph: Sirius and Harry's parents on his parents' wedding day. They were all young and happy, laughing at something probably long forgotten. Harry reached out to touch his mother's face, then withdrew his hand again; he no longer wondered what it would be like to grow up with her. He knew. He thought of the day she'd broken down in her office and confessed that she did love him, but was afraid to love him at the same time, because he was destined to be a Death Eater.

"You never meant me to be a Death Eater, Mum", he said softly, looking at her young, unlined face. The face he'd come to know in his other life had become care-worn, dark circles under her eyes, even a few grey hairs amidst the deep red. He had seen her by turns frustrated, angry, strict, disappointed and distraught (especially when Stuart died). When he and his brothers and sister had been very young, she'd even been indulgent, at times. He remembered her hugging and kissing him goodnight when he was very small and she was expecting the twins, calling him her little lion cub. He briefly patted the image of his laughing father, remembering his ghost scolding him in the Quidditch changing rooms. "She's back with you, where she belongs", he whispered.

Other than the one photo on the wall, Sirius' room was like a monk's cell. Even snooping in the desk drawers didn't net Harry anything more interesting than some old *Daily Prophets*. He went down a flight, where he decided to skip over both the guest room and Alan and Ursula's bedroom. He continued on down to the second floor, where the children's rooms were. Like the other bedrooms, these also had large bay windows overlooking the ground floor courtyard. He tried Leo and Orion's first. Now that Orion was off at Hogwarts, Leo had it to himself, but he didn't seem especially happy about this.

Leo Pierson was sitting at his desk, writing, when Harry knocked at the door, which was already slightly ajar. Leo put down his quill when Harry

pushed the door open a little and poked his face in. "Hullo. Didn't realize you were home."

Leo's mouth was open very slightly; he looked as though he was thinking *Harry Potter is in my room! Harry Potter is in my* — He snapped his mouth shut again, evidently realizing that he was gawping at Harry. "Yeah", he said, his still-high voice sounding a bit strangled. "It actually takes a bit longer for us to get home from school these days. We used to take Floo to our cousin Ian's, then get the school bus from there, since it can't travel across water. Now Dad drives us over to Wemyss Bay on the first ferry of the morning. He's not upset, though; he finally talked Mum into letting him buy a car."

Harry laughed. "Your grandmother used his car to drive us from the harbor. I noticed it's a Mercedes", he said, remembering how Leo's sister had come by her name. Leo nodded.

"Yeah, but you may also have noticed that it's a really old one. It's all he could afford. It was made the same year that Uncle Sirius was born."

"That old, eh?" Harry grinned. Leo didn't seem to understand why.

"It's ancient. And Dad loves messing about with the engine. Mum says he's just like Uncle Sirius used to be about his motorbike."

Harry was glad that Leo had relaxed; he was speaking quite naturally now, and Harry realized that he'd hardly had any chance at all to get to know the ten-year-old during the Christmas holiday or during the previous summer.

"Well, I'm getting to know your house a bit better. Can I have a tour of your room?"

Leo's eyes opened wide and he sprang to his feet. "Sure. Okay, erm, well, there's my desk", he said feebly, waving his hand over the messy surface.

"Homework?" Harry suggested.

Leo shook his head. "Letter to Orion." He frowned. "I can't wait until I get to go to Hogwarts. I've got a calendar where I'm counting off the days until I can get my wand."

Harry grinned at him. "I used to have a calendar where I marked off the days between the terms every year. I could never wait to get back to Hogwarts."

Leo looked at him in awe now. "But — but you were *suspended*", he breathed. "For a fortnight. And — you're *Head Boy*."

Harry pressed his lips together. "I did something stupid. Being Head Boy is no guarantee that you're never going to do something stupid. It's also no guarantee that you're going to escape punishment if you do something stupid."

"In fact", came a high, soft voice from the doorway, "it's probably a guarantee that you're *not* going to escape punishment. They had to make an example of you", Mercy Pierson said, watching Harry and Leo with her arms crossed.

Harry was startled, but Mercy was an inherently startling child. Her pale eyes shone out from under her dark brows, luminous and disturbing.

"Hullo, Mercy. How are you?" He decided to look at her chin while speaking to her.

"Why is it", she began, "that adults think they can distract children by just being polite?"

Harry frowned; he hadn't been trying to do that. "An adult? Me?" He stopped and thought for a moment. "I certainly don't feel like an adult."

"But you are", Leo said quickly. "You're of age. You have your Apparition license. And remember, last summer Uncle Sirius said we're to behave for you, like the other adults."

"Well, I can't exactly Apparate here", Harry reminded him.

"Yeah. Mum's not too happy", Leo said, grimacing. "And Nana and Granddad. Aunt Cass and Uncle Floyd are *really* upset. Dad's the only one who doesn't mind. He can't Apparate very well."

"And he gets to have another Mercedes now, besides your sister", Harry said with a grin.

Mercy looked cross about that, folding her arms more tightly. But to his surprise, she didn't comment on her father's car. Instead, she said, "That was much better."

"What was?" Harry asked in confusion.

"The way you changed the subject. A lot smoother than just saying, 'How are you?'"

"Erm, okay", Harry said awkwardly. "You interrupted us, you know. Leo was showing me his room." He'd been trying to put her in her place, but he didn't think he succeeded.

"Thank you", Mercy said to this. Harry frowned again. He had thought that maybe he didn't understand eight-year-old girls, but he was quickly

coming to the conclusion that his problem was with *this* eight-year-old girl in particular.

"Thank you for —" he prompted her.

"— for telling the truth."

Harry felt more than a little cross. *You'd think everything I ever said was a lie.*

"*I like that girl*", a voice hissed from under his shirt.

"You stay out of this", Harry hissed back at Sandy. Remus had brought her from Hogwarts the day before. Different operatives had been circulating in and out of the house since he'd arrived.

"*There is no need to be snippy*", Sandy informed him, sounding a bit snippy herself.

"Ooh!" Leo said suddenly. "That's right! Uncle Sirius told us about your snake. I almost forgot that you speak Parseltongue. Can I see her? Your snake?"

Harry took out Sandy and let the children see and touch her, followed by Leo finishing the tour of his room and Mercy showing him her room, while Leo made disparaging remarks about her dolls. She stuck her tongue out at her brother and Harry had to stop himself from giving them detentions, reminding himself that he wasn't at school.

"You be nice, Leo Pierson, or I'll take out my eyeballs", Mercy said to him

Harry dropped his jaw. It seemed like an odd threat. He turned to Leo. "She doesn't mean that."

Leo looked guilelessly at Harry. "Oh, she does", he said calmly. "She knows I hate it." He gave a little shudder. "It's like looking into something with *bloody* eyes..."

Harry shuddered himself, remembering the bloody eye-sockets of the blinded basilisk. He looked at Mercy. "You shouldn't say things like that, Mercy."

The disturbingly eyes looked calmly at him. "I'm not just saying it. Mum hates it, but not as much as Leo. I'm blind", she said simply to Harry. "No one told you?"

"No! I'd no idea. You get around so well, and you never bump into things. Those are glass eyes? They look so real!" And yet, he thought, they could look *more* real. That certainly explained a lot, he thought.

Leo laughed. "Oh, she's not *really* blind. Well, she is. What I mean is —"

But Mercy had taken out her eyes after all and was holding them in her hands; empty eye-sockets stared at Harry from beneath beetle-black brows. He fought back the scream trying to get out of the back of his throat. "What he means is I have magical eyes."

"Don't *do* that!" Leo complained, covering his own eyes so he couldn't see her. Without hesitating, she popped the magical eyes back into place; they swiveled uncertainly for a moment, then righted themselves and stared directly at Harry. He felt a bit faint.

"Erm", was all he could think to say.

"You weren't expecting that, were you?" she said, correctly judging this.

He swallowed. "Not for a minute", he admitted. "I — I know someone else with a magical eye", he said, trying to forget how she'd looked without her eyes. "Mad-Eye Moody."

She nodded. "I know all about him. All magical eyes used to be like his, too strong, but they got better at making them more like normal eyes. The way they behave, anyway. But since he was an Auror he wanted to have one of the old-style eyes, from before they improved them so that people weren't seeing through wall and things. As if *that's* an improvement. I know they say it's a distraction to see through things, but still... When I first heard about his eye, I *begged* Mum and Dad to get *me* eyes that could do that, but they said I get into enough trouble without being able to do that."

Harry breathed a little easier. "So, you can't —"

"— I can't see through walls or my own head, no", she admitted. She sighed. "When I grow up I'm going to get some really *good* eyes. These are so *boring*."

Harry shrugged. "Most people don't have that option. Were — were you born blind?"

She shook her head. "Accident. Dad had bought some magical fireworks, and when I was four and Orion was eight, we got into them. One exploded without warning, and —"

Harry winced. "Ow. Sorry."

She sighed. "It was the bright light that did it, really. You have to be careful with magical fireworks. I looked right at it, from about two feet

away. It's meant to be seen when it's far up in the sky, at night."

"Worse than looking right at the sun", Leo confirmed.

"And magic couldn't just — just *heal* you?"

Mercy scrutinized him, and he tried not to be distracted by the fact that he knew her eyes weren't real. He realized that another disturbing thing about them, apart from the very pale silvery-grey color, was that the pupils never changed size, the way a normal person's pupils would in different lights. "There's only so much magic can do, you know. It was easier to take out the damaged ones and put in magical replacements."

"Didn't they have a variety of colors?" he ventured, hoping she wouldn't be insulted.

She laughed. "I could have chosen a darker color. Except for blue; those are the ones like Moody's. I chose this pair because they look cool. Other people think they're weird. They can't ignore me."

That's for sure, Harry thought, unable to take his own eyes off her pale irises.

He thanked the children for the tour and continued down the stairs, going past the bedrooms belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Black and to Sirius' oldest sister and her husband. In the sitting room he found Sirius' mother sitting by the fire, reading a newspaper. "Oh, hullo, Mrs. Black", Harry said politely. She smiled placidly at him.

"Hello, Harry. Out and about, I see."

He nodded. "I reckon I could spend a fortnight in just my room and the pool, but then I'd probably be sent off to St. Mungo's after that, instead of back to Hogwarts."

She looked rather sternly at him now. "I know that Sirius is in charge of you, but when he and your father were suspended during *their* seventh year, I made them stay upstairs and didn't allow them to use the pool", she said stiffly. Harry goggled at her.

"My dad and Sirius were suspended? Why?" But even as he asked, he knew why. *The Prank*. Trying to get another student killed. Only — his dad had saved Snape.

She cleared her throat. "Well, it's not really my place to say..."

"Was it because Remus almost killed Snape?" he asked her. "Because I don't see why my father should have been suspended for that. He saved Snape's life."

She patted down her robes. "Ah, you know about that. Well, at the time, *I* didn't even know that Remus was a werewolf. So the story the school gave us was that Sirius and your father had been out after hours, sneaking into Hogsmeade, and were trying to lure another student into leaving as well. I didn't learn of what occurred until last year."

Harry nodded. "That's right — Dumbledore was trying to keep Remus a secret."

She sniffed. "There is such a thing as *too many secrets*, in my opinion."

Harry agreed. "I know what you mean." He sighed. "For instance, my aunt and uncle never told me anything about my parents when I was growing up. I only recently learned about my grandmother having been in Clan MacGregor, but I still don't know much at all about the Potters. Don't I have *any* Potter relatives?"

She drew her mouth into a line. "Not by blood. You have an elderly aunt by marriage. Great aunt, actually. Or great great. Something like that. She's in Alaska, I think. If you'd like to look through the old family Bible, you could find out more. It was rescued from your poor parents' house after they died..." She rose and pulled down a book from the shelves near the fireplace; it was quite as large as some of the largest spell books in the Hogwarts library. The leather cover bore a symbol that looked like an upside-down "V." "That's a drafting compass", she explained. "The Masonic symbol. And this is a pickaxe", she continued, moving her finger to that image.

Harry frowned. Strange things to have on a family Bible. She laid it on the low table before the sofa and opened it in the middle; there were a number of thick parchment pages inserted between the whisper-thin pages of the actual Bible. The thicker pages bore the record of the family births, baptisms, marriages and deaths. Harry flipped to the last parchment page with writing on it and found the record of his own birth. Only one event appeared after that — someone had written the date that his parents had been killed.

He sat next to Callisto Black on the squashy sofa and turned the pages backwards, seeing the record of his parents' marriage, of his own father's birth, of his grandparents' marriage. *Elspeth King to Henry Potter at St. Andrew's, Glasgow*. His grandfather's birth in Godric's Hollow, Wales. His great-grandfather's birth, and the birth of his brother, Jeremy, who later

married an Othalie Chatham. There were no children from the marriage. *She must be the aunt-by-marriage who's in Alaska*, he thought.

Harry continued moving backwards through the nineteenth century, and then the eighteenth and seventeenth. To his surprise, the very first name in the book — a birth — recorded in the late sixteenth century was not *Potter* but *Pitter*. He reckoned that a lot of people weren't very good at writing in those days. But then he looked much more closely at the other early entries; they all said "Pitter." He hadn't been looking very closely at the last names, assuming them all to be the same.

"Erm", he said uncertainly, "did my father mention the family name changing?"

Mrs. Black looked where he was pointing and nodded. "Oh, that wasn't unusual. And I remember that your grandfather actually told me that before that, the story in the family went, the name was just plain *Pitt*. It had been changed from *Pict*, before that. Very old family, you have. The Picts were here long before the Scots came to the west coast of Scotland, from Ireland."

"So", he said, frowning, "that still doesn't explain why the changes were made."

"Well, you know mining has been going on here in Britain for quite some time. It was about a thousand years ago that coal started to replace wood and charcoal as a common fuel in the British Isles. Henry the Third granted a Royal Charter for the mining of coal at Newcastle over seven-hundred years ago. Your family were miners going way back. Why do you think there's a pickaxe on the front of that Bible? That's what a Pitter is, after all. One who goes 'doon the pit', as they say."

"As *who* says?"

She laughed. "The pit means down into the mines. Colliers. That's where the Black family name comes from as well. 'Coleman' was another common name for colliers. Harry once told me —" Harry looked at her, very confused, so she explained, "I mean your grandfather, of course. That's what everyone called him. He once told me that the family wasn't called 'Potter' until moving to Godric's Hollow. Trying to get away from the mining tradition, put it behind them. His dad was Muggle, but his mum was the last heiress to the fortune of Bowman Wright. That's where the money comes from, of course."

"Bowman Wright?" The name sounded familiar to him, but he wasn't sure why. He knew he'd heard it somewhere.

"You didn't ever wonder? Bowman Wright invented the Golden Snitch. He became a rich man because of that."

Harry dropped his jaw. "You mean, the Snitch I go after when I play Quidditch?"

She nodded at him. "You're descended from the inventor. Yes."

Harry shook his head. "I never knew. Wow. I'm related to a famous wizard!" he crowed, then colored, remembering that he was rather famous himself.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "You have no idea. And it's not as though you're the only one. Bowman Wright came from Godric Gryffindor's line, but then, so did others."

Harry dropped his jaw. "Gryffindor? I'm — I'm actually related to Godric Gryffindor?"

She sniffed. "Well, he had three children, you know, and they all married. Oh, of course, the son was illegitimate and didn't have his name, and his daughters didn't carry on his name either. He was the first and last one to have the surname, 'Gryffindor'."

Harry narrowed his eyes, thinking. "Wait — I'm remembering the story now. His son was the one born to his wife's sister, the one who was supposed to marry Slytherin..."

It was Callisto Black's turn to look surprised. "Well! I'm surprised you know that story! That one didn't make it into *Hogwarts, A History*, after all. Too risqué for some, I imagine. How do you know it?"

He looked at her grimly. "That's why I'm here, in part. Because of the descendent of Slytherin's fiancée, the one he cursed and turned into a selkie. My — my friend, Mariah, is descended from her. She's a selkie. And her mum, too. She's the one Lucius Malfoy kidnapped, and he stole Mariah's selkie skin, too. Mariah told me the story."

Mrs. Black shook her head. "No family loyalty, that man. I shouldn't be surprised..."

Harry frowned again. "What do you mean?"

"Well, he's a distant relative, but a relative nonetheless. But he shows no respect..."

"What?"

"Malfoy. That was the surname of the twin sisters who were to marry Gryffindor and Slytherin. Gryffindor married his bride, of course. But Slytherin never married the other, and when she bore Gryffindor's child, she gave the child her own surname, Malfoy."

Harry couldn't believe it. "Godric Gryffindor's son was named *Malfoy*?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't believe it when young Draco Malfoy showed up here last summer. I had to bite my tongue at how funny it was to have all of you under the same roof. You, also from Gryffindor's line, young Malfoy, and then all of those Weasleys..."

"What do the Weasleys have to do with anything?"

She smiled. "I thought you knew the story? There were two brothers who married Rowena Ravenclaw and Helga Hufflepuff. They were named Weasley. I reckon I shouldn't have been so surprised that you all happened to be here last summer, now that I think about how terribly inbred some wizarding families are..." She stopped quickly, reddening. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply —"

"That's okay. I'm trying to remember... Didn't Rowena Ravenclaw's son go up to Orkney with Gryffindor's son and marry Gryffindor's half-sister? So, she would have been a Malfoy on her mother's side, and she married a Weasley..." He had to stop and laugh. Draco Malfoy would *die*. It also meant that Draco and Mariah were probably very distantly related. As well as Draco and Ginny, and the rest of the Weasleys.

"Wait — if I come from a Potter who married a Wright, who came from Gryffindor's son, who was named Malfoy, then *I'm* related to the Malfoys!" he said in horror.

She patted his arm sympathetically. "Many quite decent people are. But actually, I think the Wrights came from one of Gryffindor's daughters. Don't take it to heart. It was a long time ago. A thousand years! I wouldn't worry about it..."

He shook his head. *Even if the Wrights came from one of Gryffindor's daughters, their mother was still a Malfoy. Maybe that was the real reason the Sorting Hat wanted to put me into Slytherin.* He realized that, like Draco, he was also distantly related to Mariah, whose ancestor almost married Slytherin. She was devious enough that she probably *would* have been a good match for Slytherin, he realized. And considering that he had originally intended to give the amulet to his bride, and Harry might be one

of her many descendants, it didn't seem so wrong for him to have the amulet.

He took the amulet out of his shirt. "This is how Slytherin saw his bride betray him."

Now Callisto Black looked truly shocked. "Where on earth did you get that? No one's seen it for centuries! It was always assumed lost..."

He grimaced. Should he give the version where he lived another life and gave it to himself, or the version where Munro Kirkner got it out of the lake and pawned it at Borgin and Burkes, where Ginny bought it? "It's a long story", he said simply, fingering it lightly.

She stared at him, speechless.

* * *

He passed the rest of his suspension quite enjoyably, discussing wizarding genealogy with Sirius' mother. When Sirius came to visit on the nineteenth of March, it seemed almost sudden. The whole family gathered around the long kitchen table for their tea (Harry had stopped eating his meals in his room) and Sirius told him that they would be departing for Salisbury Plain in the morning, meeting Snape and the others in a wizarding pub nearby.

Harry slept that night only after rolling about restlessly, as he was anxious to see Ginny again — in person. He'd used the amulet to look at her from time to time during his suspension, but it just wasn't the same. He was also nervous about seeing Jeffries perform. He had bizarre dreams — at least they seemed so while he was dreaming them — which he could not remember in the morning. A general feeling of weirdness and foreboding was all he retained from them.

They took the Portkey from the entrance hall of the castle, arriving in the wizarding pub with their hoods up, obscuring their faces. While he still had his hood up, Harry concentrated and made his hair grow out so that it was covering his collar now, and he did the same with his facial hair, which he hadn't bothered shaving that morning. It wasn't as long as when he'd gone to the British Museum in his other life, but it was all a lot longer than he usually wore it. He smoothed his fringe over his scar and took off his glasses, putting them in his pocket. The world around him was rather blurry now, but that couldn't be helped. When he took down his hood, Sirius was jolted.

"Hullo! I, erm, wasn't expecting that..."

Harry grinned at him. "Just don't forget to call me `Neville'. It's my alias, ever since third year. Long story. Herm — I mean, one of my best friends goes by `Lavender'."

Sirius smirked. "Oh really? And how did you do that, anyway? With your hair?"

Harry shrugged. "Animagus training. Don't you do that?"

He grimaced. "I reckon that's the difference between being trained up properly and cadging what you can out of books." He took what looked like a wrapped sweet out of his pocket. "Thank goodness for Weasley Wizard Wheezes", he said, popping it into his mouth. He still had his hood up and was turned away from the bar patrons. After he'd chewed and swallowed, his face starting to look as though it was in flux, the features and coloring shifting and pulsing, until it finally resolved itself into Aberforth Dumbledore, alias Dick Abernathy. Harry grinned at him.

"Nice one, that. Hullo, Dick."

"Watch yer mouth, Neville." Sirius grinned at him with Aberforth's leathery face.

"The thing is", Harry said, starting to worry, "how will the others know we're *us*?"

"Perhaps it will be through your inimitable talent to be painfully *obvious*", came a familiar voice at his elbow. Harry whirled, seeing the face of Duncan MacDermid (and hearing his voice, as well) but seeing a look in the eyes that was pure Severus Snape. He assumed that it was Maggie standing next to him; she bore the appearance of a dark-haired witch he'd never met, and her arm was laced through his.

"Shall I call you — Peggy, perhaps?" he said to her.

"That could work", she agreed. "But then again — anyone who sees me who knows me will call me Dorcas Sinclair, so you should probably do the same."

When the others came forward, Harry had to get used to Ron being about six inches shorter and having short brown hair and dark eyes, Hermione being willowy and blonde and several inches taller than she'd been, with hazel eyes, and Ginny —

"Erm", he said uncertainly. "Katie?"

She grinned. "No, it's Ginny", she whispered in Katie's voice. "But you should probably call me Katie." He nodded, dumbfounded that she'd taken on the appearance of his former girlfriend. He was also finding it

interesting that Hermione was a blonde, and one that bore more than a passing resemblance to Fleur Delacour. He could tell that this also wasn't lost on Ron.

"Remus is on another assignment, unfortunately, so he won't be joining us. Shall we be off?" Sirius said in Aberforth's voice.

They joined a long procession of robe-wearing people, many of whom Harry though had to be Muggles, based on their speech and behavior. They were playacting at being witches and wizards, which was mildly bizarre to him since the last time he'd been out in a large crowd of wizards, for the Quidditch World Cup, the wizards were supposed to be imitating Muggles. He could spot some real witches and wizards in the crowd, who were visibly sneering at the Muggles and their games of pretend. Their clothes also had an air of authenticity, whereas the Muggle robes all looked too clean, too perfect. Their hats were especially odd looking. Snape saw him looking at a very stiff wizard's hat going by on the head of a Muggle wizard-wannabe.

"Mass-produced", he sniffed. "The best hats are still hand-made."

Harry tried not to smile; he was still a bit cross with Snape. As they drew nearer to the standing stones, Harry looked around at the crowd in which he found himself; there were *people* as far as the eye could see. On the green plain around their goal there was also a sea of tents where some people had been camping out, which he was fairly certain would normally be frowned upon by the National Trust. It looked like it was shaping up to be far more than the thirty-thousand Hermione said were expected for the summer solstice, which was still three months away and usually more popular than the spring equinox.

It was difficult for him to think of the tall blonde girl as Hermione, but he said to her, as she walked beside him, "Why are there so many people? This is just the spring, after all."

She grimaced. "Well, it's also Jeffries, isn't it? Not to mention that since you went away on suspension, there's been the whole NHS debacle..."

He frowned. "What NHS debacle?" He didn't know much about the National Health Service, but he had acquired his glasses through the NHS since he was very small. The thought made him take his glasses out and put them on, to see better.

"Oh, they probably don't get any Muggle papers at Ascog, do they?" She grimaced. "It's that Harrington-Smythe woman again. She's dismantled the National Health Service. I mean, if he cures Ron of being a werewolf, that would be one thing. It isn't as though he could just walk into a doctor's surgery and ask for something like that. But that's something — well, really extraordinary. The Prime Minister himself has been encouraging people to go to Jeffries as an alternative, even for little things, if you can believe it."

They finally drew near enough to see the ring of standing stones properly. With his glasses on, Harry could see that there was a broad stone in the center, over which Rodney Jeffries himself stood, with his arms raised, welcoming the faithful. He wore a robe of purest white and presided over the huge stone as though it was an altar, *his* altar, the place where someone or something would be sacrificed to the glory of *him*. Harry looked at Jeffries and swallowed.

"I can believe it."

Axis

As they approached the ring of standing stones, Harry looked about; for acres around, Salisbury Plain was a seething mass of humanity. Harry wondered how far away some of the Muggles had had to park. Shading his eyes with his hand and looking toward the village from which they'd walked, he thought he saw a cluster of buses in a car park near where the village ended and the plain began. Had Jeffries been *busing* people to this event? he wondered.

He heard music and turned his head; people were up on top of the stones that served as lintels, resting on top of the huge uprights that formed the ring. The lintels formed a circular walkway far above the ground. A murmuring rhythmic sound was coming from the people up there; Harry realized that they were singing the percussive beginning of Jeffries' theme song, *The Impossible Dream*.

"*BUM* ba-da-da *bum bum bum bum...* *BUM* ba-da-da *bum bum bum...*"

The choir had to be a hundred strong, rather than the two dozen or so singers Harry had seen in Surrey. They were all wearing long apple-green robes, the color of spring. Many of the singers had wreaths of flowers on their heads. Beside him, Hermione clutched at his arm, a shocked look on her unfamiliar face. The blonde woman whose appearance she taken on was much paler than Hermione usually was, and her face was growing paler still.

"What are they *doing*?" she said, aghast. Harry frowned. She tried to stand still, but the crowd made that impossible and they had to move forward whether they wanted to or not. Ron was on Hermione's other side and Katie — no, Ginny — was on Harry's right.

"Well, you've heard of singing, right?" Harry said, motioning with his head to the people on top of the stones, some of whom were starting to sing the lyrics while others continued to be a human orchestra, humming the chords in strict rhythm.

"*To dream the impossible dream... To fight the unbeatable foe...*"

"Of course I've heard of singing, Harry", she said acidly. "I mean — well *look* at them!" she said, pointing.

Ron, Harry and Ginny looked; they didn't know what Hermione was going on about. But then Maggie — he still had to get used to her looking like Dorcas Sinclair, let alone calling her that — rushed up and grabbed Snape's arm, doing just what Hermione had done.

"What are they *doing*?" Maggie exclaimed, also as though she had not heard of singing. "Every Muggle here will need to be memory-charmed!"

Hermione looked at her triumphantly. "Thank you!" she said, nodding at Maggie.

"To bear with unbearable sorrow... To run where the brave dare not go..."

Harry turned to Snape, whom he had seen as Duncan MacDermid before, at the ceilidh in Hogsmeade in his fifth year. "I take it", Snape said to Maggie and Hermione, not bothering to imitate his uncle's accent, "that you have both seen Muggle photos of this monument?" Maggie and Hermione both nodded at him. His mouth went very thin. "Well, what is not generally known is that the people who created this did *not* allow it to fall into disrepair — they were probably the first magical people who thought to protect their monuments by using a Confundus Charm to make Muggles believe that it was a ruin. It looks perfectly normal to those who are magical as long as they have never seen a representation of the ruined version *first*. If that is what you expect to see, then it very likely appears to you at this moment as if those people are walking on air —" he said, nodding to the singers atop the stones, "— rather than on solid rock. The monument is actually completely intact. Just tell yourself it is so", he said to Maggie and Hermione.

"To right the unrightable wrong... To love, pure and chaste from afar..."

Harry looked at Ginny, who took her sister's hand. Maggie nodded. "Like when I couldn't see Ascog Castle right off because I'd seen a photo of the ruins first?" Snape nodded to her. She closed her eyes, clearly concentrating very hard. Hermione held Ron's arm and did the same; when they both opened their eyes, they gasped.

"Oh! I see it! You're right, it's there! Amazing! All this time!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Yes, but even though they assumed that the ruins would make it uninteresting, they didn't reckon on many things. For some time now the Ministry of Magic has had to work closely with the Prime Minister to

ensure that the National Trust — which is about half wizard — keeps too many people from coming here", Snape told them.

"To try, when your arms are too weary... to reach the unreachable star!"

He snorted and added, "That idea has clearly gone up in smoke. The Muggles here also won't believe people can be walking on the air up there for very long; soon they'll all be able to see it for what it really is: a completely intact monument from thousands of years ago. And once they start seeing through *those* charms..."

Hermione gasped. "Will they — will they start seeing through others?"

Snape looked very grim. "It's a danger. We usually have walls separating the magical and Muggle worlds... This Jeffries is trying to bring them crashing down", he said quietly. Harry didn't think Snape shared Sirius' view of Jeffries' harmlessness. He swallowed.

"No wonder he wanted my aunt working for him", Harry said slowly. "A witch who doesn't think about keeping magic hidden, who's had no formal training..."

Sirius finally spoke, although Harry was still thinking of him as Aberforth. "Now, Harry. I've never seen your aunt perform magic while working for Jeffries..."

"Maybe she behaves herself when you're around, so you can't grass on her!" he said hotly.

"This is my quest! To follow that star! No matter how hopeless! No matter how far!"

"I saw what my aunt was capable of when she thought no one was watching. Her best friend caught her at it, cleaning the kitchen back in Surrey! She's never done *anything* in moderation, whether it's hating me or spoiling Dudley and Dunkirk. We have to find her!" he said in frustration, frowning at the sea of bodies moving steadily toward their goal, albeit more slowly than Harry would have liked.

"The staff headquarters are in that large tent", Sirius said, pointing. They were approaching from the west, but they could easily see the huge white tent about thirty feet northeast of the stone circle; a steady stream of people were going in and out.

"To fight for the right... without question or pause... to be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause!"

"Your aunt will be there, probably giving out the press passes and checking credentials. We need to do a little swimming upstream to get there, but I think we can manage it."

They stuck together very closely and tried to make their way toward the large tent, but they kept getting pushed off-course and having to veer north again to compensate.

The choir continued to sing while they moved toward the tent. Harry could see Muggles pointing at the stones, patting some of them and exclaiming, and he knew that the charms that had kept non-magical people from seeing Stonehenge as it truly was for thousands of years were no longer having any effect upon many of Jeffries' ecstatic followers.

Glancing again at Ginny, who was wearing Katie's form, Harry was suddenly reminded of casting the *Revelatio* spell in Jeffries' tent and seeing the images of the Muggles, as though every person present had performed magic. And now he realized that *they had*. It wasn't necessarily to do with the music, as he'd thought the previous summer.

He turned to Snape. "Is — is seeing through a concealment charm itself a kind of magic?" he wanted to know.

He rubbed his chin — or Duncan MacDermid's chin — with his hand, looking thoughtful. "One might consider that to be magic..."

"Because I think that's why there were magical signatures in Jeffries' tent! Last summer, I — er, Katie, that is — cast a *Revelatio* spell to find out whether he'd been doing magic at his shows, and it looked like *everyone* there was doing magic. I think *this* is what they were doing. They were *believing*! That was the magic that was being performed!"

Hermione stopped, gawping at him. "Are you saying that *believing* something is the same as doing magic, Harry?"

He was very excited. "It's a *kind* of magic. Come on. We need to believe in what we're doing to cast spells. And if having the ability to believe that I can do something lets me do it, why shouldn't Muggles *believing* something also be a kind of magic?" They were farther from the singers now and the music had receded into the background.

"When everyone knew about witches and wizards and magic, Muggles saw magic because they expected to, I reckon", Sirius said thoughtfully. "When magical people started hiding themselves from Muggles, it became rarer and rarer for most people to see magic, and even when they did, much of the time they didn't think that was what they were seeing..."

"They didn't *believe*", Harry said excitedly. "They convinced themselves that they were seeing what they *expected* to see, which is to say *not* magic..."

"Is that *also* a kind of magic?" Ginny wondered softly.

Snape seemed to consider this. "Self-delusion? In its way..."

"They're just believing something else, but they're still believing", Harry said walking faster now in his excitement. "And they have to do that, convince themselves that they're seeing what they expect to see, because otherwise the world wouldn't make sense to them, and the world *has* to make sense, or they'd go mad."

Ron nodded. "I can speak from experience", he said grimly.

Something else was percolating in Harry's brain though; he slowed down and walked on in silence, Ginny's arm linked in his. He stared into space, hardly paying attention to the other people around him as he tried to work through this new theory.

"Well, here we are", Sirius said as they approached the tent. "I've been to see Mrs. Dursley a number of times, so hopefully there won't be a problem..."

"Aunt Petunia!" Harry said suddenly. "That's it!"

"What's it, Harry?" Ginny wanted to know.

He grinned at her. "That's how Aunt Petunia became a witch!"

Sirius' brows drew together. "What *are* you talking about, Harry?"

"Hear me out... When my grandmother was dying of cancer, Aunt Petunia wanted my mum to cure her. She *believed* that magic would save their mother. Then, when *she* got cancer, and she went to Jeffries, he told her to believe, and she *did*! But *what* she believed was that if she became a witch she could cure *herself*! So — she did! Become a witch, that is. And she *did* cure herself! Don't you see? She truly believed that that was what was necessary."

He paced excitedly. "And Jeffries... he tells that story about Voldemort attacking him in Westminster station. Perhaps it was because Voldemort had just got his body back and his magic wasn't quite normal again yet, I don't know, but when he attacked Jeffries, I think that because he was a Squib, Jeffries believed that if only he was magical, he could do something to protect himself. That's what he believed was necessary for him to be safe and when Voldemort cursed him *that's what happened*! He became a wizard! Perhaps his *belief* interacted with Voldemort's spell somehow. And

I think since then Jeffries has worked it out — that the basis of all magic is *belief*, and that if you can *truly* believe something you can make it so. *That's* why he tells people to believe. But I don't think he can make just anyone magical — I think he can only do it for people who *know* about magic, and who believe that that's what they need. Someone like my aunt would know about magic because of my mum, and she was convinced that magic would cure *her* mum, so I think that's why she thought *she* needed to be a witch. Jeffries knows about magic because he's a Squib. Or was one. You see?"

"I think so", Hermione said uncertainly. "But magical genes are still what determine what sort of magic you can do, and how powerful you are. Your aunt had a magical sister, and probably had some magical genes already. Jeffries was a Squib, so he had magical parents and also probably already had some magical genes, just not enough, until the Westminster attack..."

"So, a combination, then, of belief and magical genes. But remember what Dumbledore said about Muggles collectively doing magic? When they put their magical genes together in one place, along with belief..."

He felt very excited, very close to figuring something out, bouncing on the balls of his feet as Sirius drew back the tent flap and ushered them inside one of the less-well traveled openings. The tent seemed to be divided up into a maze of cubicles; it was very stuffy, despite sweeping up and up. It was several stories high and listening to the noise contained within it was like holding up a conch shell to one's ear, except that the roar of the ocean had been amplified a thousand times. And it was just as intelligible. Hermione and Ginny immediately put their fingers in their ears. A middle-aged balding man in a spring-green robe was passing by in a sort of corridor between the cubicles, but when he saw them he immediately stopped and entered the cubicle into which they'd all stumbled, pointed his finger at them accusingly.

"'Ere now, `oo are *you*?"

"Armin!" Sirius said, extending his hand, grinning. The man didn't take it. Sirius was confused. "It's me. John —"

Snappe suddenly trod heavily on his foot, and Harry was standing close enough to him to hear him whisper, "*Wrong face, you idiot.*"

"Erm", Sirius said feebly. "My — my friend John Norwich said I should come see you. Didn't he say anything? We're here to see Mrs.

Petunia Dursley."

Armin looked surprised; what hair he had left was very dark, as were his heavy brows, under which his small suspicious eyes surveyed them all warily. "I dunno `bout that. Mrs. Dursley don't take kindly to people botherin'er on setch a busy day..."

"She's my aunt", Harry said. "I came a long way. I haven't seen her in months."

Armin looked Harry up and down. "Well, I reckon you're about as she said you are. Wot's yer name again?"

"Harry", he said simply, not giving his surname, should any wizards be nearby. Armin continued to examine him and he self-consciously smoothed his fringe over his forehead.

"Wait `ere", Armin said at last, disappearing into the maze of cubicles. Soon he was back and Harry's aunt was with him. When he saw her he dropped his jaw.

She looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Don't gawp like that. You look dreadful! Is that what you do every year when you're off at school? Let your hair grow like a hippie? And what on earth are you doing here? I have work to do. Six American reporters turned up with no credentials. They claim that they write for `web sites', if you please..."

"Oh, they're files that people upload onto computers called servers that are connected to —" Hermione started to say brightly, but Petunia Dursley frowned at her and backed up warily. Harry realized that the members of the party who had used the Polyjuice sweets were not going to be recognizable to his aunt.

But there was one person his aunt thought she knew. She turned to Ginny, still holding onto Harry's arm. "Oh, hello there Kitty", she said to her, evidently thinking that she was Katie Bell. "I didn't realize you two were still together", she added a little stiffly, nodding at Harry. "I just saw your father a few minutes ago. Did he become separated from the rest of you? We've tried to warn large groups to stay together, and in the packets we sent out we recommended that groups traveling together wear matching outfits or have flags they can wave, to make it easier to find each other", she said briskly, sounding very much like an event organizer. In that his aunt was indeed one of the most frightfully organized people he knew, apart from Hermione, it seemed like a good fit for her.

However, he had a new problem: Sam was here. "Are you sure it was Sam?" he asked, his voice shaking. "Where? When?"

She sniffed. "I really haven't time for this. You should keep better track of —"

"Aunt Petunia!" Harry said quickly. "I'm sorry, I'm letting myself get distracted. I — I mainly wanted to come see you to make certain that you're all right", he said, trying again to assimilate her new appearance. As far as he could tell, her face hadn't changed. But she looked *very* different despite this. She'd dyed her hair dark red. *Is she trying to look like my mum?* he wondered, noting that she was wearing it the way that his mother had worn her hair in his other life, long but with some of it gathered together on her crown with a clip, so it wouldn't be in her face. It actually made her look absurdly youthful, he thought, but the very strange thing was that, in combination with her face, she could, for the first time Harry could remember, very easily pass for Lily Potter's older sister. He glanced uneasily at Sirius, wondering whether he'd seen her look like this before and why he hadn't said anything to Harry after one of his many trips to check on Jeffries.

"I'm just fine", she said quickly, checking her watch. "Although if I don't get back to work the reporters will start finding dreadful things to say..."

Harry drew his lips into a line. "Uncle Vernon misses you!" he said suddenly, before he lost his nerve. She froze.

"Vernon Dursley", she said, ice in her voice, "misses someone to clean up after him, cook his meals and wash his clothes. He misses clean towels after his bath and fresh sheets when he's ready to sleep at night. If you're so concerned about him, I recommend that you inform him that all of those services are available from fine hotels." She pursed her lips more tightly even than McGonagall could have managed.

He stepped toward her. "I don't think that's the only reason Uncle Vernon misses you —"

She looked a little guilty as she backed up from him. "Nonsense. He's taken me for granted for over twenty years. I've had enough. And I have to get back to work now, so if you'll excuse me... Enjoy the show, everyone!" she said brightly, as though she hadn't just been discussing her husband in the coldest possible terms. "Do be certain to fill out the form in the program — you did all get programs?" She looked at their empty hands

nervously, then rushed over to a large crate sitting in the corner of the cubicle, practically throwing thick programs, like glossy magazines, in their general direction. "We're trying to compile data about why each person has come, where they first heard about Rodney..."

When she was done giving them all programs, she walked off, calling behind her, "Don't forget to complete the forms! I must fly!"

When she'd gone, Harry turned in shock to Sirius. "Did you know she'd dyed her hair?"

Sirius looked guilty. "Well — I wasn't sure how you'd take it. I didn't think I should even mention it, since by the time you saw her she could have changed her mind..."

"And *Sam's* here..." Harry shook his head at Sirius, surveying his tanned skin and white hair, the familiar twinkling blue eyes. "I wish you really *were* Aberforth; I wish I could ask him what he thinks he's doing, letting Sam come to this thing..." Then Harry bit his tongue, remembering that he'd once thought Rodney Jeffries would be a perfect solution to Sam's problem. That seemed a very long time ago.

Ginny looked up at him, her eyes moist. Harry had to keep reminding himself that she wasn't Katie. "You know why he's come..." she said softly.

Sirius nodded. "Right. He just wants to be back to normal — for a wizard. The way he was before Azkaban. Remember, he was a powerful Auror. But in prison, he didn't have the option of turning into an animal, like me. Dementors didn't get to me the way they did to most prisoners. And he had cellmates, others going mad around him, which may not have helped his state of mind. The sanest man in the asylum will probably eventually go mad. Just from proximity..."

"Or if he wasn't mad, he'd seem so by comparison. After all, isn't it mad to be in an asylum if you aren't mad?" Ron said in a sardonic voice.

Harry swallowed. "Yeah, I used to think Sam could be 'fixed' if he went to Jeffries, but now — I don't know. I don't trust Jeffries", he whispered cautiously, looking around, lest any of Jeffries' lackeys should hear him. "I think we should try to find Sam..."

As they were leaving the tent, Hermione pulled on his arm to delay him. "Was that a dig, Harry?" she wanted to know.

He frowned at her. "A dig?"

"Ron is here so he can be cured by Jeffries, or did you forget? But you just said you don't trust him. He cured you, but Ron doesn't deserve the same treatment?" she said acidly.

He snorted through his nose. "I was burnt. And even Sam — well, he used to be able to do magic and now he can't. I can understand why he's here. But Ron's fine as he is. He doesn't *need* to be changed, Hermione, and you don't even know that Jeffries could do it. Not to mention, this was all your idea. I haven't once heard Ron say that he wants to be cured, have you? He's here for *you*. He doesn't want to be here, I don't think. But at this point... I think he's afraid you'll leave him if he doesn't go through with it... or if it doesn't work..."

"I wouldn't do that!" she exclaimed, her unfamiliar light eyes large and worried.

Harry looked at her very directly. "Don't tell me; tell Ron", he said grimly. They exited the tent, joining the others. Harry swept his eyes quickly over the sea of humanity, despairing of finding Sam in such a crowd. "We'll never spot him in all this..."

"Well, he'll have to go forward to be healed, won't he?" Ron said logically. "There's a queue for it. Let's take a look at who's waiting."

They wove their way very slowly through the crowd, the singing sounding louder again as they drew nearer to where Jeffries stood at the altar stone. There were about six people waiting on either side of him, wearing rough robes that appeared to be made from sackcloth. Harry looked back in the queue and saw Jeffries' people carrying armfuls of the simple robes, helping people into them, creating a procession of identically-clad pilgrims, all eagerly awaiting the moment when Jeffries would lay his hands upon them. Harry anxiously scanned the faces of the waiting faithful, hunting for Sam's auburn hair and work-tanned face. It was Ginny who clutched his arm tighter and pointed.

"*There!*"

Sam was very close to the front of the part of the queue still outside the circle, already wearing a rough robe. It was strange for Harry to see him like this; he'd only seen him in Muggle clothes. A month earlier, when giving his daughter away to Percy Weasley, he'd been all smiles. He looked anxious now, peering around nervously, as though worried that someone might recognize him. He didn't seem to have noticed Sirius, who

was wearing Aberforth's face, nor Ginny, who was now his daughter's double. Harry wondered whether the real Katie knew he was here.

There was a roar from the crowd and Harry redirected his attention to Jeffries, who was being hugged by a large middle-aged woman, her robe pulling tightly over her massive body. She was smiling and crying all at once and looked like she just might end up strangling Jeffries, from the hold she had on his neck. But he was laughing along with her, and gave her a kiss on top of the head (this was easy, as she wasn't any taller than Mrs. Weasley). Some of his retinue helped her along, moving her out of the way so that he could turn to the man on his left. The singing had been reduced in volume, Harry realized, the elevated choir humming lightly, but now a crescendo of noise grew again from the singers, and they belted out the chorus again with renewed fervor:

"This is my QUEST, to follow that STAR..."

Harry winced; they'd just passed under one of the lintels and the noise seemed to have suddenly been dropped down on top of his head quite violently. Looking up, he saw the choristers link arms; perhaps that would keep anyone who had vertigo from feeling dizzy and falling. Above them the sky was a perfect blue with large, white fluffy clouds filling most of the sky, helping to cut the sun's glare, drifting before the sun periodically, but not oppressively. There were a few dark clouds near the horizon, but they seemed too far away to worry about. He looked around again; they were inching through the crowd very slowly, the sound of the singing pounding in Harry's ears. Sam still seemed miles away, progressing through the queue, only two pilgrims between him and Jeffries now as the music grew louder still...

"And the world will be better for this," they all sang in unison; *"that one man, torn and covered with scars... still strove with his last ounce of courage..."*

They inched forward some more; Harry didn't know how long it took. Just as he saw that Sam was second in the queue, the sun seemed to go out. He looked up; an enormous fluffy cloud that he'd seen in the sky only minutes earlier had drifted in front of the sun, but instead of making the light only a little dimmer, it appeared now that a raging storm was going to strike, it was so dark. The center of the cloud was deep grey shading to black here and there, although the cloud was still quite light around the edges. There were no longer dark clouds at the horizon. Harry frowned.

How could the cloud have filled with moisture so quickly? Why was the darkness so oddly-shaped, and why did the cloud seem to be so low?

He pointed and said to Hermione, "Do clouds usually look like that before rain?"

She tipped her head back, shading her eyes with her hand. "Rain? Oh, god, I hope it doesn't rain. With all of these people here, that would be complete chaos!"

"My brothers and sisters shall come."

"What?" Harry said to Sandy quickly. "What did you say, Sandy?" He'd been glad of the opportunity to bring her with him, since he'd arrived by Portkey, but at the same time, her predictions always made him very apprehensive.

"My brothers and sisters shall come."

"What is it, Harry?" Ginny said, clutching his arm more tightly. "What did she say?"

"Who?" Hermione and Maggie said together.

"Sandy", Harry said slowly. After he'd told them, the girls all immediately lifted up their robes and looked around their ankles. Sirius snorted and Hermione glared at him.

Ron frowned at Hermione and his sisters. "What the hell are you all doing?"

"Snakes!" Hermione exclaimed. "Sandy told Harry that there are going to be snakes! Who knows how many!" Snape raised one eyebrow and Harry nodded at him.

Maggie looked at Harry and he could see she was thinking very hard. *Is that what Sandy said, Harry?* she asked him, this thought appearing inside his head suddenly.

Well — yes. Kind of. But I never know when —

I — I had a strange dream last night, Harry, she told him now. *I wasn't sure whether I should say anything. It's possible that she doesn't literally mean `snakes'...*

A scream went up from somewhere and Harry lost his concentration; Maggie's thoughts disappeared from his mind. He looked around frantically. "What happened? Who screamed?" He searched the ground, wondering whether he could talk to dozens of snakes simultaneously, whether they'd listen to him if he asked them not to hurt anyone...

"Look up!" Hermione cried. Harry froze; somehow he'd never seen something he liked when she'd said those two simple words. But when more screaming erupted from the crowd, he threw back his head and saw two huge shapes descending through the low, dark cloud. They were the reason why the cloud had appeared to have large, bulky shapes within it. They were hiding above it, far up in the sky (even though it was lower than clouds usually were), and now they were descending in tight corkscrews, each with a small rider. And the first two were followed by two more, and two more after that...

"*Dragons*," he whispered in awe, watching the enormous forms draw nearer with a fatalistic fascination. Around him he heard strange *pops!* and *cracks!* punctuating the screaming, but he couldn't move. He felt like his feet were bolted to the ground.

"The Swedish Shortsnouts, from the reservation", Ron breathed. "*Bloody hell*. The Death Eaters are going to attack all of these people with *dragons*."

"More to the point, Ron", Hermione said with a shaking voice, pulling her wand out of her pocket, "they're going to attack *us*, too. And we need to try to stop it", she added, sounding terrified but determined.

"Stop it?" Ginny said, her voice going up an octave. "Just *how*, might I ask? When Harry went up against a dragon he at least had his broom..." She was now gripping his arm quite painfully and trembling head to toe. Hermione's mouth had gone very thin; she had no answer for Ginny. "And what about the restriction on underage magic, for me? Or restrictions on doing magic in front of Muggles?" Ginny demanded.

"There will just have to be memory charms afterward", Snape said tersely.

"And as for you being underage... well, let's worry about all surviving this first", Harry said softly, his insides clenching with fear for her as he gave Snape a worried look. *If anything happened to Ginny...*

Ginny took out her wand. "Right. Good point. I have no intention of going back to my parents in a coal scuttle", she said in a low, determined voice. She looked up at the dragons, her face very hard. "The Ministry be damned", she added, sounding less convincing. Harry tried to forget about his old nightmare, Ginny turning into a skeleton...

"One thing is for certain", Ron said his wand also out now as the dragons drew nearer to the earth and the crowd around them began running

in all directions, panicked and clueless. "We know now why all of these people have been gathered here." He looked levelly at Harry. "Jeffries must be in league with You-Know — I mean Vol — Voldemort."

Harry shook his head. "We don't know that. I'm not defending Jeffries. I wouldn't put much past him. But this might be just as much of a surprise to him as to us. I once thought that Voldemort might not like Jeffries, and maybe this is just confirmation of it. There are loads of Muggles and Muggle-friendly wizards here; he also hates *them*, and this gives him a lot of them in one place to attack. Very convenient."

"Get under the stones!" Snape yelled, hustling them to the nearest megaliths. The choir had ceased singing; they were almost all crouched on the enormous lintels, huddled in shaking groups of three and four. They were only about fifteen feet in the air, but the crowd was too thick around the megaliths; it was impossible for them to just jump down. Harry was trying to work out how they could help the singers, but this train of thought was brought to a halt as one of the dragons abruptly stopped spiraling down and suddenly *swooped* down over the landscape, making a terrific chorus of screams erupt from tens of thousands of throats. The great beast was heading toward some people on the edge of Salisbury Plain, from what Harry could see. It was quite some distance from where they were, pressed against one of the enormous stones ringing the ancient circle.

In its way, the Swedish Shortsnout was quite beautiful, with its shimmering silver-blue scales. Harry could see now that the dragon's rider had a helmet and was controlling the dragon with a bit and reins, sitting on a saddle that was carefully strapped around the beast's ribs. As he watched from a distance, Harry saw the dragon expel a huge blast of fire into the air over the heads of the crowd, causing the people to scatter before it. No one actually appeared to be hurt, however; it looked to Harry as though the wizard rider had pulled the dragon up at the last minute, so that the fire didn't go too low.

"Why'd he do that?" Ron said, having noticed the same thing. Harry bit his lip.

"Dunno. Since when are Death Eaters afraid of hurting people? Seems that if you come to a crowd like this riding a dragon, your goal is probably to hurt people."

Ron shook his head, frowning. "Yeah. I don't get it. And we *still* don't have any ideas for how to fight the bloody things." He held up his wand as though it were utterly useless. "I *knew* I should have gone on that trip with Mum and Dad to Romania. Maybe Charlie could have taught me a thing or two about dragon-handling. Sirius recommended that Conjunctivitis Charm for you, even though he didn't get to tell you about it, but I haven't learned it and I don't think you have either."

"No, it was a good thing I summoned my broom..." He opened his eyes wide. "That's it! We need brooms. Loads of them, not just for us, but for any other witches or wizards who might be here. Although..." he went on, thinking, "I could have sworn I heard some people Disapparating. Any witches or wizards who *were* here might be gone now..."

"*If* they can Apparate. Not everyone can", Hermione reminded him.

"Hermione!" Harry said urgently. "Listen, you need to go back to Hogwarts and get help. Not just brooms, although they would be good. You have to tell Dumbledore what's happening. He can contact the operatives. And see if he can bring some teachers, or maybe the Dueling Club. And the Elven Army. But not all of them. We don't want to leave Hogwarts defenseless, in case this whole thing is meant to be a distraction..."

"Some bleeding distraction!" Ron said, watching two more dragons fly over the crowd at the edge of the plain and breathe fire over the heads of the running, panicked people.

"You never know with Voldemort", Harry said grimly.

Sirius had heard what Harry had said. "I'll go with Hermione. After we Apparate to Hogsmeade we can both change into our animal forms and run to the castle much more quickly that way. I can talk to Dumbledore while Hermione collects brooms. Once he knows what's what he can make an announcement for certain people on the staff and Dueling Club to go to the entrance hall. And he can contact the Ministry for Aurors."

"Right", Snape agreed suddenly and unexpectedly. "But don't take too long. We're going to need those brooms", he said tersely, watching the dragons with his uncle's dark, troubled eyes. Sirius and Hermione Disapparated with a double *pop*!

They continued to watch apprehensively, the only still people in the enormous, frightened crowd. Four dragons were at the edge of the plain, as though assigned to the cardinal points, and two others were swooping over the sea of people, making them run back and forth in panic. From what

Harry could see, the dragons were breathing plenty of fire, but whenever they seemed to be flying too low, their riders pulled up, to keep the fire above the crowd. They seemed very purposefully to avoid hurting anyone. The crowd had gone from running *away* from the standing stones to running *toward* them; the dragons made it impossible for anyone to leave the plain. Suddenly the ring of stones seemed like a haven, away from the dragons, even though they could fly to the circle in a trice.

Harry saw Ginny drop her jaw. "They're *herding* the crowd!" she cried suddenly. "Don't you see? They're trying to get everyone in the center!"

They all stood watching in shock as the crowd surged toward them, and Harry could also see numerous people who were being knocked down and trampled in the process. This was going to be very bad, he could tell. He looked up, his mind working furiously.

"We need to do some herding of our own, then. First — can you and Ron try to get as many people as possible into the big tent?" he said to Maggie. He turned to Ron. "Put a fire shield charm on it first. And it's a good thing you're strong — if anyone resists being taken into the tent, just pick them up and carry them. They'll probably go along pretty quickly when they find out they can't fight you. The three of us", he went on, indicating Snape and Ginny in addition to himself, "will try to get the choir down to the ground. They could be fried to a crisp up there. Oh, and expand the interior of the tent, too. We need an enormous fire-proofed space where we can put all these people." Maggie and Ron ran off, hand in hand, and Harry turned to Snape and Ginny. "What do you reckon we should do to get them down? Sir", he added, addressing Snape.

Severus Snape regarded the frightened people above them with narrowed eyes. "If there weren't so many already milling around I'd recommend softening the ground and getting them to jump, but there's no room. We could Transfigure them into small birds, but then they'd just fly off in fright and we wouldn't be able to remove the spells again..." He frowned, clearly frustrated. There were just too many people, Harry thought. And still more dragons had descended from the clouds; there were eight of them now, driving the multitudes toward the center of Salisbury Plain, and the screaming of the terrified people was so constant that it had become a kind of white noise to Harry.

"I could change into a griffin and fly a few people down at a time, but that could take a while, and I'd still need more space than we have right

here..." He swore. "I'm starting to miss fighting giant spiders", he said bitterly, glad that Ron had gone off with Maggie so he wouldn't hear Harry say this. "For some reason that didn't seem so bad, compared to this..."

Ginny's eyes lit up. "That's it!"

Harry and Snape both frowned at her. "What's it?" Harry wanted to know.

"Don't you remember? The way we got the people away from the spiders? The pulley system, conjured ropes flung over broomstick handles. Well, this is actually an easier problem to solve. All we need to do is conjure some ropes for each stone bridging two of these tall stones and secure them. Then the people can just climb down the ropes! Or we could conjure ladders, but the ropes would take up less space. And ladders could be knocked over by the crowd and end up hurting people."

"Yes, " Snape agreed, "that would be the best thing, probably."

Harry eyed the dragons, still hovering around the perimeter of the plain; he could see that the riders were watching the panicked, screaming crowds converging on the standing stones. Ginny was right; they were definitely *herding* the people into position. And Harry had a very bad feeling that once they were all where they were "supposed" to be, the dragons would be allowed to vent their full fire-breathing ability on the crowd...

"I may still have to change into a griffin before this is all over." He looked at the abject terror on every face in sight. "Of course, with so many people seeing dragons, I think it's already a foregone conclusion that loads of memory charms will be needed." It was time to forget everything they'd ever learned about hiding magic from Muggles; Harry, Ginny and Snape aimed their wands at the high lintels and long ropes erupted from the tips, wrapping themselves tightly around the top stones and hanging down within a few feet of the ground.

Harry pointed his wand at his throat and said, "*Sonorus*." He looked up at the terrified people, none of whom had attempted to start climbing down, "Just climb down", he told them. "The ropes will hold. You can't stay up there, you're targets if you do. Those dragons are Swedish Shortsnouts; they can turn you all into cinders in a few seconds. Climb down now!" he ordered them. He took the *Sonorus* spell off himself again.

"Harry!" Ginny said anxiously, watching the crowd around them as people on the ground had taken notice of what he'd said. "You're going to

panic everyone!"

He grimaced, seeing that she was telling the truth; some people were running in aimless circles now that he'd explained just how bad it was. "They need to know!" he shouted so she could hear him over the screaming of the crowd. "Look! They're doing it!" Some brave souls had begun to test the ropes and were sliding down to the ground. Harry smiled, turning to Ginny. "Come on! We need to have ropes all around!" He pointed his wand at the next lintel, while Ginny aimed at the one just beyond that. Soon all of the stones in the circle had ropes and the choir members were sliding down. Ginny had seen that some of the people were in pain from rope-burns and she started to move toward them with her wand out, but Harry barked at her, "There's no time for that! They have to get to the tent. They can't stay out in the open!"

He, Ginny and Snape tried to send as many people as possible in the direction of Ron and Maggie, near the tent, pushing people along who weren't moving quickly enough, but the mass of bodies still seemed largely to be moving in aimless circles. Harry moved back to the standing stones to see just how many people were outside the ring on the open plain; it seemed to be tens of thousands still. Everywhere he looked there were people, people... Ginny and Snape were with him again, also mesmerized by the sight of the dragons swooping over the crowd. There were some stragglers who seemed to be trying to make a break for it, at the southern edge of the plain.

"Oh, no", Harry breathed, as one of the dragons turned, the rider pulling on his reins, bearing down on the breakaway group. Harry saw the rider crack a whip; a split second later the dragon emitted a cloud of fire, blue-hot, incinerating the would-be escapees. Ginny's scream felt like it pierced his eardrum; Snape's face (or rather, Duncan MacDermid's) was utterly white, sweat pouring down it. He clutched his wand tightly, impotently. The mob of people nearest the casualties screamed even more loudly when they saw the bodies, running straight at the circle of stones to try to escape the same fate.

"Where are they with those damn brooms?" Snape growled. Harry held Ginny and patted her back while she sobbed into his shoulder, forcing himself to look at the blackened corpses. One or two figures were still leaping about, seemingly made of flames, screaming horribly, just as Harry remembered Evan Davies doing, a sight he still saw in nightmares...

They'd been a warning to others: *Do not try to escape*. "I don't need a broom", Harry said suddenly, setting his jaw stubbornly. "I can fly without one."

Ginny lifted Katie's tear-streaked face to him and cried, "*No, Harry!*"

"I have to!" he shouted above the chaos around them, his stomach clenching as he realized that this might be the last time he held her, and it wasn't even her face he was able to see, her body he was holding. "I need to try to do *something!*" Hoping he wouldn't start crying, he pulled her to him and kissed her deeply but quickly. "I love you Ginny. Always remember that." He looked at Snape. "Take care of her."

Snape surprised him by suddenly pulling him into a brusque hug, patting him earnestly on the back. Harry nodded at him, then stepped back and closed his eyes, feeling the change roll through him. He felt his paws touch down and opened his eyes, seeing that the crowd had spread out around him, several people screaming at the sight of a green-eyed lion in their midst. He took advantage of the extra space he was now afforded to spread his wings and leap into the sky, hearing Ginny cry out behind him, "Good luck, Harry!"

He moved his wings as quickly as he could, climbing higher and higher above the circle of stones. Most of the dragons were still fairly close to the perimeter of the plain, urging the crowds toward the interior. He decided to start with the bastard who had murdered those people in cold blood, the Death Eater who had made his dragon breathe fire at poor innocent nobodies who had never crossed Voldemort, apart from being born Muggles. He was high in the sky now and the people below him looked like so many confused ants; he could see Ron and Maggie pushing people toward the enormous white tent, and he hoped that Ron had been able to fireproof it, but he didn't want to take the chance that he hadn't. The dragons *had* to be kept away from the tent.

When he was at a good height, he dove toward the dragon that had murdered the people, feeling the wind whistling past his ears, squinting so that the rushing air wasn't quite so painful on his eyes. Things always looked different to him when he was in his griffin form, but the dragons looked *very* peculiar, their silver-blue hides shimmering with magic, except — *There*, he thought, spying it even as he was zooming down toward the beast. He was a magical beast himself, at the moment, and he could see the magic imbuing the dragons' hides in iridescent waves. But

along the spine of each enormous animal, where the plates of armor met, there was a narrow line, a division that allowed them to move freely. Between the shoulder blades and the haunches there were larger gaps, to give the wings and limbs adequate movement. The Death Eater was between the shoulder blades; Harry would land on the rump, closest to the other large gap in the armor. He was very grateful that Swedish Shortsnouts did not have the kind of tails Hungarian Horntails had.

He managed to set down while the dragon was being steered back to the perimeter, his hind legs landing on the thick silver-blue scales, but his forepaws landing on the fleshy unprotected area revealed by the armor gap. He sank in his claws. The dragon roared in fury and released a burst of blue fire that towered in the air over the frightened crowd. The Death Eater was flung back and lost his seat; he was lying on his side behind the saddle. His helmet fell off and Harry saw long light hair and a pale, pointed face staring at him in horror, and then contempt...

"*Potter!*" Lucius Malfoy spat, as though uttering an obscenity. Harry dug in his claws, feeling the dragon's impressive muscles tense as it rose higher in the sky and jerked back and forth, trying to dislodge Harry. This made Lucius Malfoy slide off the beast's back, but he still hung onto the reins. Dangling by the dragon's left wing, he was getting beat about the head every time the beast drew its wing back and forth. Harry wondered whether he would be concussed as a result.

Malfoy released his right hand from the reins and plunged it into his robe pocket, pulling out his wand even as he dangled at the dragon's side, still holding onto the reins with his left hand. He pointed the wand at Harry and said something Harry couldn't hear, but when Malfoy was finishing the incantation, the dragon suddenly swooped upward, ruining Malfoy's aim, causing the curse to bounce harmlessly off the dragon's magical hide.

Harry squinted into the wind, which was whipping his mane around his head; he clenched his claws, holding on as tightly as he could, so that they went very deep. He could feel the dragon's blood seeping out between his paws and its flesh. Malfoy pointed his wand again, but once more, the dragon's unpredictable movements caused the curse to go awry. However, this time, Harry could see the amber beam of light ricochet back at Malfoy himself, rather than shooting harmlessly into the air, and he saw Malfoy

recoil as his own curse struck him. He released the reins with his left hand and fell down, down...

Harry swallowed, seeing how very high in the sky they were; the people on the ground were quite tiny. *He couldn't possibly survive a fall like that.* Harry thought fleetingly of Draco, of his reaction to seeing his father die in the Pensieve. Shaking himself irritably, he put his mind to the task at hand and began inching his way toward the saddle, having to push his paws down between the plates of the dragon's thick hide at every step, to find a new fleshy spot where he could dig in his claws, to keep from flying off into space like Malfoy. The dragon continued to swoop and plunge, trying to shake him off.

When he had finally reached the dragon's shoulder blades, he quickly changed back into a human and made a grab for the reins, so that he might control the beast himself, although he wasn't sure how to get a dragon to do as he wanted. He gained the seat Malfoy had abandoned and gripped the reins hard, pulling up, hoping that would mean the dragon would go higher into the air, where it wouldn't put more humans at risk. Harry worried that, having killed some people already, this one might be hungry to repeat the experience.

As he soared up and up, his stomach flopping uncomfortably inside him (it was nothing like a broom, a hippogriff or flying on his own), he said quickly, "Are you okay Sandy? Sorry about suddenly transfiguring like that. And you know, any time you'd like to tell me that you've Seen something, you're welcome to. You wouldn't be able to explain the last thing you said, would you? I'm still trying to work out that one. Have you Seen anything else? Anything that might help me?"

"Tooo whooom are yooo ssspeeeeking, Two-Foot? From where deeeed yooo come? There wassss a winged beeeeasssst heeeeere, a hurtful beeeeasssst... Whooo eeess theeess `Sssandeee?" said a booming voice. After a moment's hesitation, Harry realized that it was the dragon.

Nervously, he spoke to Sandy again. "Erm, Sandy, did you hear the dragon say anything?" He felt like his arms were being pulled from their sockets as he struggled to hold onto the reins.

"Yes, Harry Potter. Of course I did."

"So — I could have just spoken to the dragon during the First Task?"

"I do not know what you are talking about", Sandy informed him archly, and he remembered that he didn't have her during his fourth year.

"What I mean is — dragons speak human language?"

"Oh, no, Harry Potter. They speak Wyrmtongue."

Harry dropped his jaw. "So — so I'm not just a Parselmouth? I'm also a — what did you call it? I'm a Wyrmmouth?" He thought for a moment. "That sounds dreadful."

"No", Sandy said, unperturbed by his last comment. "I have never heard of a human who can speak Wyrmtongue."

"Then — then how could it understand me?"

"Wyrmtongue and Parseltongue are related because dragons and snakes are related", she informed him. "I learned many things in the year I was not with you. Some dragons are merely snakes with wings. The basilisk is like a dragon with no wings, really... it understands the speech of snakes and the speech of dragons..."

"So — it could understand me because I was speaking Parseltongue to you, Sandy?" he said, finally starting to understand. "And I can understand what it's saying because its language is similar to Parseltongue?"

"Yesss, *Two-Foot. But I steel do not undersstand tooo whooom yooo are sssspeeking...*" the dragon boomed again.

"Please, erm Mr. Dragon, sir. I have a snake companion. Her name is Sandy and she's wrapped around my arm..." But he stopped suddenly in confusion. "Sandy", he said, "what I just said to the dragon sounded like English to me."

"It was", she informed him.

"But —"

"You cannot speak Wyrmtongue. I have been with humans — before I met you — and understand human speech, although I can only be understood by a Parselmouth. You must speak to the dragon through me. It does not acknowledge human speech."

"Oh", he said, unsure about this. "Okay then... I was just saying that you're my snake companion and that your name is Sandy and you're wrapped around my arm..." He hoped the dragon was paying attention.

"*That exxxplainssss eet...*" the dragon acceded. Harry held onto the reins more tightly, pulling back when it seemed that the dragon had started to descend toward some people still outside the standing stones. He'd been understood. He was making progress.

"I'd like to tell the dragon that I'm sorry, Sandy, about hurting him with my claws, when I was a griffin — a winged beast", Harry apologized

awkwardly. It felt strange to not be able to address the dragon directly, but he couldn't help that. He needed to make friends with the dragon, and the first thing he'd done was to hurt it a great deal. Harry glanced back quickly; the dragon's hide had a gush of silvery-white blood staining it, as it poured from the wounds along its spine. "I needed to make sure I didn't fall off, Sandy. I was trying to get to the man who was controlling the dragon, the rider..."

"Oh?" the dragon said, barely interested. "*Eeesss the other Two-Foot gone? Gooooood. Heee alssso had clawssss... Thank yoooo for ssstopping using your clawssss...*" They swooped toward another dragon, and Harry thought quickly. *Malfoy must have been wearing spurs, digging into the flesh just behind the shoulder blades.*

"I won't use my claws on the dragon again, Sandy. I promise. But I need his help. Do you think he could ask the other dragons to stop attacking the people on the ground?"

As the great beast continued to fly, it moved its head around so that Harry was eye to eye with it; he wondered whether it could injure itself by blasting Harry with fire at this moment. Harry gripped the reins with white knuckles, his heart in his throat and his life passing before him as he gazed into the hypnotic vertical pupils of the dragon.

"Yesss..."

The dragon's long forked tongue slithered back between its saber-like teeth. Harry let out a long sigh of relief. The dragon turned his head and plunged down, approaching one of the other dragons, bellowing at it; Harry had to strain to understand what it was saying, as it was speaking more quickly to its mate than it had to him.

"*Ceasetheattack, Obrothersofthemountains!*" it cried. As he listened, the words began to separate themselves in his mind so that it wasn't so difficult to make out anymore. "*Cease the attack, O sisters of the hills!*" He wondered, if he'd tried harder, whether he could have made out some Wyrmtongue when Hagrid was showing him the dragons in his fourth year, before the First Task. But they might just have been bellowing in pain and fury, because of their imprisonment. They might not have been *speaking* at all...

"I wish, Sandy", Harry said loudly, "that the dragons could know that the people on the ground do not wish to harm them and that the men, er, Two-Foots on their backs do. I wish the dragons knew that I have a friend

who knows dragons, Sandy, a friend who will help them get back to their home in Sweden, where they will not be at the beck and call of Two-Foots..."

"*O brothers and sisters!*" the dragon he was riding called out, making Harry grin. The dragon told the others what he had said, although Harry didn't managed to catch everything he said, and they started to rise into the sky, leaving off herding the people into the ring of stones (although that task was largely finished; Harry could see the mass of people moving toward the tent instead, where they would be safe — hopefully).

As for the question of whether the dragons could be injured by fire from one of their fellows, that was answered for him soon enough when a Death Eater dug his spurs into the dragon he was riding and struck it with a long, curling whip, trying to get it to dive down again; it was no longer obeying him. Harry felt his dragon lurch beneath him and dive toward the other one, about a thirty-foot drop, and he felt a blast of hot air strike his face painfully when his mount sent a blue spurt of fire at the figure riding the other dragon. Harry wanted to scream in horror, but his throat felt utterly parched, as was the air all around him, it seemed. In seconds, the Death Eater was a blackened corpse, holding onto the reins in a kind of *rigor mortis*. Harry thought his gloves might have fused, from the heat, so that they couldn't be released from the reins now. The dragon flew on with its inert rider; it was no longer under the control of a "Two-Foot."

Harry's skin felt very tender simply from being exposed to the air around the dragon when it had been so super-heated; he understood now why the Death Eaters were wearing helmets. His skin was starting to smart very badly, and he wished he dared take out his wand to ease the pain. He tried saying to Sandy, "I — I wish the dragon hadn't done that, Sandy, so we could bring these men — these Two-Foots — to justice —" He wasn't sure he meant it, but he was certain that he couldn't take seeing someone else killed in this way without spewing onto the dragon's neck. His stomach churned inside him, and not from the dragon's flight. He actually found himself hoping that Malfoy *had* survived his fall...

Suddenly, one of the other Death Eaters seemed to leap into the air and away from his dragon; Harry's heart leapt into his throat as he braced himself for yet another death, but this quickly proved to be unnecessary. The man had had a broom with him, wedged under the saddle; this Death Eater was an impressive flyer, swooping around the dragons, who were

going after him now quite aggressively, despite their riders trying to restrain them. (Harry's mount had not communicated his wish to the other dragons that the riders be spared.) More than once, he just barely missed being fried to a crisp, and he actually caused two of the dragons to collide with each other with a clever feint, making Harry wince instinctively, and causing the enormous beasts to roar with inarticulate fury.

As the dragons went after him, he continued to elude them, swooping and tumbling through the air, going straight up and then into a daring dive, pulling out suddenly and whirling in the opposite direction. Harry was convinced that he'd never seen anyone fly so well, with the possible exception of Viktor Krum, who was now dead.

Who the hell is he? Harry wondered.

Suddenly, the Death Eater turned and aimed his broom upward, outstripping his dragon pursuers. He flew straight toward the enormous cloud which still hovered high above the circle of stones; Harry noticed for the first time that there were still dark, bulky shapes discoloring the cloud, and even as he watched, two more dragons descended through the mist. These dragons also had riders, but that wasn't all; these dragons were larger than any of the previous eight. They bore under their bellies enormous carriages, as though the dragons were passenger-carrying dirigibles, and with horror, Harry remembered Percy saying that this was how the dementors had been removed from Azkaban.

And now he knew *why* they'd been removed. The carriages were full of dementors, making Harry's blood run cold, even from a distance. Such a huge concentration of them was already affecting his mind; he started to lose his grip on the reins...

"The Ministry is infested with Death Eaters", he heard his mother's shrill voice in his head. *"It's rotten to the core; there's no way to be safe if the Ministry arranges our going into hiding. We'll all be dead within a week. No; there's only one way — "*

"Avada Ke —"

"Expelliarmus!" he heard his own voice explode.

Suddenly, he was falling; he jerked his eyes open. He'd slipped from the dragon, the dementors having taken over his mind, even at a distance. The ground was rising at an alarming rate and thinking quickly, Harry became a griffin, spreading his wings, swooping down in a low glide, brushing the grass before he started moving his wings, ascending again.

He tried not to think what would have happened if he'd taken longer to transform...

His head felt clearer again now that he was in his griffin form; it was harder for the dementors to affect him. But he could see that the people on the ground weren't so lucky; as the dragons with the dementor-filled carriages descended toward them, he could see that they were starting to move more slowly, lackadaisically, with no rhyme or reason. That was why the dragons had been herding people into the center of the plain.

The dragons' riders had them set down the carriages outside the circle of stones, one to the north and one to the south; the dementors, he could see, immediately started spilling out of their transports, gliding eerily toward the cowering, gibbering people who couldn't even see them, unless there were still any witches or wizards who hadn't fled. Harry wondered where Snape and Ginny were, whether they were well away from the dementors.

If he was going to conjure a Patronus, he'd have to risk returning to his human form. He swallowed, watching the dementors' other-worldly movements, the jerky flight by Muggles who had no idea why they felt such hopelessness, despair, and an inner coldness.

The Hopeless ones shall walk the earth... and happiness this earth shall flee...

He thought, *Oh, god. Maggie's Fraserburgh Prophecy.* Harry flew toward the ring of stones and carefully landed on the central lintel on the east side, facing the altar stone. What he saw there shocked him; he'd been unable to see what was going on in the circle's center, partly because of the sheer numbers of people, partly because of the five stone archways arranged in a horseshoe pattern behind the altar stone. From his new vantage point, he saw that Jeffries was standing on the altar stone, higher than the rest of the people, and he was shouting. After a confused moment, Harry realized what he was crying into the wind: "*Believe! Believe! Believe! Be —*"

Harry could also see he was growing weaker by the moment as the dementors drew nearer; he was pale and sweaty, trembling head to toe. There were still too many people in the ring, huddling between the inner horseshoe of uprights and the outer circle. It seemed that Jeffries' die-hard supporters were loath to leave him, and he wasn't being parted from the altar stone. Harry folded his wings against his flanks, hesitating to change

back to his human form, knowing he would be hit with a wave of cold and despair the moment that it happened, that he would have to struggle very hard to come up with a happy thought to conjure a Patronus strong enough to drive so many dementors away. But just as he had this thought, something that helped him feel much happier did in fact occur. Suddenly, he had company on the top of the lintels; members of the Elven Army were appearing all along the top of the ring, and a few at the bases of the standing stones, with loud *cracks!* Dobby himself appeared not two lintels away from Harry, who immediately changed back to his human form then, so Dobby would know it was him, and the other elves would know as well. After all, he was their general. The moment he was in human form again, Dobby cried out and ran along the lintels, jumping on him in a most unmilitary-like manner.

"*Harry Potter, Harry Potter!*" Dobby screeched excitedly. "The Elven Army is here, the Elven Army is here!" Abruptedly, Dobby seemed to realize that he wasn't exactly obeying protocol; he leapt down before Harry and saluted smartly. "Lieutenant Dobby reporting, sir!"

Harry tried to smile at him through his discomfort; feeling utterly cold inside and hearing his own voice and his mother's voice seconds before he killed her weren't exactly conducive to his being a good general.

"Get those people into the large tent, Dobby!" he cried with effort. "I'll try to draw the dementors away from them!"

Dobby saluted again and whistled loudly to the army. The elves were also starting to be affected by the dementors, however, so Harry amplified his voice again and gave all of the elves his orders. This seemed to wake them up a bit and they leapt into action. *Where are Sirius and Hermione with those brooms?* he wondered, glad that they at least had sent the elves. He didn't dare Apparate back to Hogsmeade, not with Sandy on his arm. He couldn't afford to lose her; she'd proven invaluable in managing the dragons.

With horror, he saw that his aunt was next to the altar stone, but it seemed that she was there because she was trying to convince Jeffries to get down and follow her to the tent, as she was pulling at the sleeve of his robe. Around them, the elves were pushing a sea of people toward the tent. Some of the more reluctant ones were being *levitated* by the elves, making Harry wonder whether that was really a good idea. (The sheer volume of

the memory charms that would need to be cast was starting to make his head ache.)

There were still people in the ring, including his aunt and Jeffries. The dementors were entering through the uprights, left and right. Dripping with sweat, Harry lifted his wand, crying loudly, "*Expecto Patronum!*" A wisp of grey smoke emerged from his wand and he flapped it with agitation, repeating, "*Expecto Patronum, Expecto Patronum!*"

A slightly stronger-looking silver cloud flew from his wand, but he knew that his thoughts weren't happy enough at the moment for him to produce a Patronus that would drive the dementors away. He kept trying, feeling more and more frustrated, and glad that he wasn't seeing Snape or Ginny anywhere about (they must be in the tent, he realized), although he could have used Snape's Patronus.

Suddenly, a series of *pops!* exploded all around him, on top of the lintels, where he still stood, and on the ground far below. Hermione and Sirius appeared on top of some stone lintels, carrying armfuls of brooms. They wore their own faces again; the Polyjuice sweets must have worn off, Harry reckoned. The two of them stood just above where the dementors had passed through into the circle. Some of the Hogwarts teachers appeared as well as some of the seventh-years who were in the Dueling Club and who had learned to Apparate. There were also some people Harry took to be Aurors and operatives, many of them appearing rather far out on the plain, beyond where the dementors had landed.

But best of all, near the center of the circle, facing Harry, stood the imposing figure of Albus Dumbledore, his wand raised. Dementors flanked him, yet he waved his wand authoritatively, crying, "*Expecto Patronum!*" with a ringing voice. From his wand burst an enormous white cloud, and Harry was confused, having expected Dumbledore to be able to produce a corporeal Patronus. After a moment he realized that it was a solid Patronus, but like Snape's, it appeared to be made of multiple creatures.

Bumblebees.

The bees swooped and dove at the dementors, and they turned, gliding back toward the carriages which still rested on the ground outside the ring of stones, beneath the weary dragons. The dragon Harry had ridden was keeping his compatriots flying high in the sky, well away from where they

could provide any help in herding people. They seemed very small now. The remaining Death Eater riders did not seem to be able to control them.

Hermione and Sirius made their way along the lintels to Harry, each hugging him awkwardly, because of the brooms; Sirius handed Harry his own broom and Harry nodded at him and grinned. He was glad to see his godfather's face again, much as he liked Aberforth Dumbledore. It hardly seemed to matter now whether they were disguised.

"Shall we?" Sirius said with a lopsided smile.

"Harry!" Hermione cried out suddenly.

He saw where she was pointing; behind Dumbledore, two dementors who had not been driven away by his Patronus were bent over, respectively, his aunt and Rodney Jeffries.

The dementors had taken their hoods down, to give the Kiss.

"Noooo!" Harry cried, leaping onto his broom and raising his wand in the air. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

This time it worked; as he dove toward the altar stone on his broom, a tremendous stag leapt from his wand tip and galloped past Dumbledore, who nodded at it with approval; Harry's Patronus drove the dementors away from both his aunt and Jeffries, who appeared rather glazed-over. Harry turned in the air and went back in the direction from which he had come, dropping down and landing beside his headmaster.

"Professor Dumbledore!" he cried. "Can you help me get the two of them to the tent?"

Dumbledore's face was terrible to behold as he realized what the dementors had nearly done right behind his back. "Get some of the students to do that. And find Professor Snape; we need more people out here who know how to conjure a Patronus if we're to get the dementors under control", he said sternly, his eyes hard as steel.

Harry nodded and aimed his broom up again, directing Parvati Patil, Susan Bones and Millicent Bulstrode forward to help his Aunt Petunia, whom they recognized from Hogwarts. He got Justin Finch-Fletchley and Ernie MacMillan to help Jeffries; he seemed to be gibbering. While they were doing this, Harry flew to the tent ahead of them, but just as he was going to land and enter, to look for Snape, his Potions professor emerged from one of the openings about fifteen feet away from him. Like Sirius and Hermione, his Polyjuice sweet had also worn off and he appeared as his usual self.

"Dad!" Harry said without thinking, flying toward him quickly. "I mean —"

"I know what you mean, Harry", Snape said quickly. "What should I do?"

"Conjure a Patronus. We need to get the dementors under control."

Snape nodded grimly, gripping his wand with white knuckles; he didn't comment on the advent of the dementors. When he'd gone into the tent, the chief problem had been dragons. "I see the others finally got here", he growled.

"I'll try to get you a broom", Harry said, kicking off again.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" he heard Snape cry behind him, and, looking over his shoulder, Harry saw a flock of white bats burst from his wand and shoot at the nearest dementors, some of which had been trying to enter the tent, sensing the crowd of people in there.

Harry found Sirius, flying toward some dementors with his wand raised. Harry turned himself around and flew by his side, asking him, "Is there a broom Snape can use?"

"Sorry, Harry! Gave them all out!" Sirius accelerated and pointed his broom up, over the standing stones, and Harry did the same, following him.

"That's okay!" Harry said, having decided what he was going to do. He flew back to Snape and landed next to him, then dismounted and mutely handed him his broomstick. Snape looked at him in horror. Harry yelled at him, "Take it! I don't need it!" And to emphasize this, he dropped the broom and changed into his griffin form, spreading his wings and taking to the air again. He heard a rushing sound nearby and turned his head momentarily to see Severus Snape flying by his side, his wand lifted like a saber and his robes flapping around him, looking for all the world like a cavalryman riding into battle.

Harry banked and flew straight down toward the circle's center again, where Dumbledore stood, wand raised, as though conducting the movements of his Patronus — and maybe he was, Harry thought. This was a level of control over a Patronus that he had not yet learned. As he watched Dumbledore, an image leapt into Harry's mind that almost made him crash. He managed to touch down without incident, though, and folded his wings before transforming. He started speaking the moment he

was in human form again. "Sir — I've just thought — a way to deal with the dementors —"

Dumbledore's face was grim and terrible as he moved his wand, and the ghostly swarm of bees swooped at a dementor, driving it from Professor Flitwick. "I'm listening", he said, still watching his Patronus. "You *could* conjure a Patronus yourself..." he added.

"That's just it! Just doing that forever — that's not an answer! A Patronus just pushes them around. They need — they need a *destination*, and not just the carriages!"

Dumbledore looked at him over his half-moon spectacles. "What did you have in mind?"

Harry told him; for a moment Dumbledore stared at him in surprise and shock, but he very quickly closed his mouth and nodded. "You're right. It's the only way. But we need to make certain that *no one else* is affected, understood?"

Harry nodded. "I'll try to get everyone out of the center; this would be a good place for it. We can drive the dementors *back through* the stones into the circle..."

Dumbledore nodded at him again. "You go far out on the plain; take others with you to help. Try to get anyone who does not have a broomstick into the tent. I will await your signal. I believe that I have a way to stay rather close without a problem."

"What about the elves, sir?"

Dumbledore thought for a moment. "Tell Dobby what is going to happen; the elves should leave again, I believe; they would very likely be at risk, as they are so small..."

Harry nodded. "I'll tell him." He changed into his griffin form again and took to the sky; it felt like it took him forever to stop beside each person, transform himself, tell them what was going to happen, then change and move on. The first two people he managed to talk to, luckily, were Hermione and Snape, so they told some of the others, and soon the word had been passed to everyone. Dobby was in the process of getting the elves to leave.

Harry flew up high above the plane, bringing his wings together once, twice, three times. Dumbledore saw this signal and engorged his wand into an old-fashioned wizard's staff, striking the ground at his feet with it, shouting an incantation which echoed unintelligibly from the enormous

stones surrounding him. A fissure ripped the ground in two at his feet along the east-west axis of the circle. The stone arches that formed the circle were not affected, however, as the rip in the earth defied the laws of physics and stretched open, to the south and north, like a great maw. But the five arches that were around the altar in a horseshoe shape were affected; the central arch split down the middle, each half of the enormous lintel cantilevering over the chasm. The altar stone also cracked down the middle, half on each side of the split now, far away from each other on opposite sides of the circle. The rumbling of the earth tearing itself apart was deafening, but Harry saw that Dumbledore was standing his ground on the north side of the fissure, although, even in the air, Harry could feel the vortex of Limbo pulling at him, and he could see Dumbledore's robes being whipped around his legs as though he was standing in the eye of a storm.

But Dumbledore did not waver; he thrust his staff into the air, crying out another incantation. Harry saw his Patronus appear again, the bees rushing to do their master's bidding, and Harry landed and transformed, pulling out his own wand to conjure his Patronus anew and send the dementors toward the chasm.

It was working; his Patronus and at least ten others' were goading the dementors toward the ring of stones, and Harry wanted to cheer when the first one slipped over the edge and plunged into Limbo. They were being drawn even more quickly toward the opening now, and Harry couldn't help the feeling of elation springing up inside him; his happiness made his Patronus even stronger, and the silvery stag leapt about Salisbury Plain, rushing at stray dementors, herding them into the circle, pushing them toward their new home.

But then suddenly, Harry looked down and was surprised to see that he was standing only about twenty feet from the circle of stones; he'd been utterly unaware of being drawn toward the vortex of Limbo himself, and even as he realized this, he looked down in fascination, watching his own feet moving inexorably forward, as though they belonged to someone else, as though he no longer had control over them. He tried to think about becoming a golden griffin, but his mind seemed to be confused about how to accomplish this, as though he had a kind of amnesia, and he continued to march toward the circle...

As he passed the perimeter of the circle, someone cried out his name; he looked up to see Snape flying his own broom overhead, looking like he was straining not to end up in the chasm himself. In fact, he had taken one of the ropes that had been hanging down from the lintels — the ropes they had provided for the choir — and had tied it around his waist. "Grab one of the ropes, Harry!" Snape cried. Even as Harry watched, Snape seemed to feel compelled to dive into the abyss on the broom, joining the dementors, and he disappeared completely from sight, the rope going taut, before he zoomed up again, shaking and sweating, as he battled his attraction to the vortex.

Seeing that, Harry came to his senses for a moment and reached out for the rope dangling down from the lintel under which he was inexorably passing, wrapping it around his waist and securing it with one of the many sailor's knots he'd learned at Severus Snape's knee. He still felt himself drawn to the abyss, but a part of his mind was able to fight it, to say, *No. I'm not doing that... I won't...*

Suddenly, a loud *crack!* made Harry turn his head; Dobby appeared beside him. "Harry Potter! You are all right! I had to see..." But within seconds, Dobby was being drawn toward the chasm.

"*Accio Dobby!*" Harry cried quickly, making the elf suddenly fly into his hands. Harry's heart was beating so loudly it seemed to be in his ears, and he could hear that Dobby was breathing very hard.

"Dobby thanks Harry Potter", he said, wheezing. "Dobby worried that Harry Potter —"

But suddenly, a beam of red light struck the huge standing stone to Harry's left, causing him to duck under the lintel, Dobby under his arm. Harry looked up in alarm, seeing the Death Eater who was the phenomenal flyer. He swooped down again, clearly aiming at Harry, and Harry could see his face this time, angry and contorted though it was. He had evidently abandoned his helmet after leaving the dragon he'd been riding. In his shock, Harry's grip on Dobby wasn't what it should have been, which allowed Dobby to leap up in the air and take the curse meant for Harry. Harry realized too late what it was he'd heard the Death Eater saying, as he watched the crackling green light hit Dobby and took in the sound of speeding death.

"*Noooooo!*" he cried with every ounce of his being, watching the inert Dobby fall to the ground. To Harry's surprise, though, Dobby was no

longer being pulled toward the fissure; only living creatures seemed to feel the attraction toward the abyss. *Not Dobby, no, how could this happen...*

He swooped over the lintel where Harry was grasping the rope, and Harry pointed his wand at the man's broom, crying, "*Accio broom!*" His means of transport abruptly whipped out from under him and he fell to the earth — or he would have, if there had been earth below him. But there was not, and Harry had only a split second in which to see Ludo Bagman's surprised face before he disappeared below the earth and into Limbo.

Seeing a human fall into the abyss, Dumbledore struck the earth again with his staff, crying out the incantation to close the earth, and Harry noticed for the first time the rope that was tied around Dumbledore's waist like a belt, leading back to another standing stone; he'd decided not to take chances. A great wind swept down from the sky, knitting the earth back together, including the sundered lintel and altar stone, and soon the grass in the ancient circle was as pristine and undisturbed as it had been before Dumbledore had invoked Limbo. Stonehenge was intact once more, as it had been for four thousand years.

Harry stood in shock, holding Ludo Bagman's broom in his hand, staring at Dumbledore. The old man did not seem to be judging Harry, though. Instead he took the rope from around his waist, saying calmly, "You can untie yourself, Harry. And now we need to do something about the other Death Eaters who have played a role in this", he said, nodding at the dragons flying about in the sky, their riders still trying unsuccessfully to control the animals now that they'd decided they didn't want to be ordered about by "Two-Foots." The Death Eaters who had been riding the dragons with the dementors' carriages strapped to them had long ago leapt down onto the ground and presumably Apparated to safety.

Harry gazed down at Dobby's inert form. "But sir —" he choked out.

"I'll take care of him, Harry. Right now it's the living who need you more", he said gently. Harry bit his lip to keep it from shaking, nodding to Dumbledore and trying to focus. He used Bagman's broom to fly with Sirius up to one of the dragons; Harry conjured a rope to hold the man in place while Sirius stunned him. Speaking through Sandy, Harry managed to thank the dragon for his help and promised that they would all soon be returned to their proper home in Sweden. The dragon flew to the ground and settled down to wait; Harry marveled at how *docile* dragons could be

when spoken to in their own language (or Parseltongue, which they understood nearly as well).

As he was flying back to the stone circle, the Death Eater suspended between his and Sirius' brooms, he saw two people trying to apprehend another Death Eater and not faring nearly as well; this one fought back. Harry heard a cry of, "*Crucio!*" and saw the spell head right for Ginny just as he noticed that it *was* her; she'd been swooping toward the dragon on her broom.

She screamed when the curse hit her, falling from her broom, which luckily caused the curse to break, but Harry suddenly abandoned what he was doing, diving quickly so that he was under her falling body. When she landed across the twigs of his broom, he reached behind to keep her in place, realizing too late that abandoning Sirius meant that his godfather was now plunging to earth under the weight of the Death Eater. To his relief, Sirius got his bearings and managed to point his broom up again, although the Death Eater's stunned body now trailed along well below it in a rather sloppy manner, the man's mouth hanging open slackly.

Harry flew to the ground with her, stumbling off his broom and holding her in his arms, crying freely, patting her cheeks. "Come on! Wake up! Are you all right? You *have* to be all right..." Her eyes fluttered open and she seemed surprised to see Harry. But before she could speak, he had pulled her into his arms again and was kissing her. A moment later, however, he was very confused, as she was pushing him away quite hard.

"Harry?" she cried, her breathing labored. She was turning bright pink. "Is that you behind all that hair? What do you think you're doing? I'm married now, remember?"

He stared down at Katie's face, realizing that she really *was* Katie Bell — or Katie Weasley. Since Sirius, Hermione and Snape's Polyjuice sweets had already worn off, Ginny's probably had as well, and if she'd been flying around with the dragons she'd have looked like herself. Katie must have been one of the Aurors who had come to help, he realized. She didn't know he'd grown his hair as part of a disguise; she wasn't Ginny.

Harry thought that what skin showed on his face was probably redder than a Weasley's hair. "Erm, sorry. See, Ginny took this Polyjuice sweet to look like you, and I thought —"

"I know", she said, nodding. "Percy selected the sweets for your trip himself. But I'm really Katie, and you're not my boyfriend anymore,

Harry..." she said, starting to smirk, but instead wincing and groaning. Harry hovered over her, uncertain of what to do. "I think I cracked some ribs when I landed on your broom", she said in a soft, pained voice. "Small price to pay", she said in a falsely bright voice; Harry could still hear the pain behind it. "I would have been much worse off if I'd hit the ground from that height. Don't worry, Harry", she said hurriedly. "I don't know how many bones I broke over the years, playing Quidditch at school, let alone during my Auror training. I probably haven't got a single bone in my body that hasn't been healed at least once."

He nodded. "Do you — do you mind me carrying you? Or do you think you can walk?"

She looked like she was going through an internal struggle, but finally said, "Actually, if you wouldn't mind —" She seemed a bit embarrassed about it, but he tried to smile reassuringly at her, picking her up and carrying her to the tent while she held the broom. Once inside the tent, Harry saw that a sort of hospital had been conjured in an area cleared of the cubicles. Rows of camp beds held the wounded, or in some cases, judging from the vacant stares, the Kissed. The dementors had reached some unfortunate people before being sucked into Limbo. Harry spotted a familiar figure bending over his Aunt Petunia, in a camp bed next to Jeffries, trying to get her to eat some chocolate. There was a pervasive odor of cocoa in the tent and a number of people were sitting on their camp beds devouring large pieces of chocolate. He carried Katie to her.

"Nita! What are you doing here?"

Her hair was clustered around her forehead in damp, humid curls, her usual blonde bun tumbling down at the back of her head, becoming more of a ponytail. When she looked up in surprise, her lips pursed, and he could see that her blue eyes were very guarded behind the spectacles. To his surprise, she was dressed as a Muggle, in plain jeans and a grey fleece jacket. "I was looking into Jeffries, after you told me that he'd healed you. I — I wanted to see how — how he did it — " She frowned, then waved her wand, which she removed from her jacket pocket, and conjured another camp bed. "Put her down here. You're a lot hairier than the last time I saw you", she commented. But before he could explain, she was back on Katie. "What's wrong with her, she wasn't Kissed, was she?"

Katie frowned after Harry gently lowered her. "No, I was *not* Kissed", she said acidly. "I still have my wits about me. I've just cracked some ribs.

Who are you again?"

Nita raised one eyebrow as she poked and prodded Katie's mid-section. "I'm Dr. Anderssen, of St. Mungo's. And you are —?"

"Katie Weasley."

Nita stopped what she was doing. "Weasley? How — how is that possible?"

Katie frowned. "How is what possible? I'm married to Percy Weasley. You've heard of marriage, I suppose? It's not like we invented it", she added caustically; Harry reckoned the pain was making her a bit cross.

"Katie!"

Harry turned at the familiar voice; Percy was striding through the rows of camp beds. His hair was as neat as ever, but his glasses were askew and he looked slightly *singed*, soot on his face and hands. When he reached his wife, he sat on the edge of her bed, brushing the hair from her brow and smiling lovingly at her. She took his hand in hers and kissed it.

"I'm all right, love. I would have had a bad time of it, but Harry caught me. I have some cracked ribs, that's all." She gave him a gentle smile.

Percy turned to Harry, his blue eyes wide behind his glasses, reminding him a great deal of Ron. "Thanks, Harry. I — I don't know what —"

"It's okay, Percy", Harry said quickly, deciding not to tell him that he thought he'd been saving his sister.

Almost as though the thought of her had summoned Ginny, he looked up to see her making her way through the rows of beds, looking quite anxious, and he half-ran to meet her, holding her tightly against him, feeling like he would never let her go. She buried her face in his neck, sobbing. "*Oh, you're all right, you're all right*", she repeated like a litany. He tilted her face up and she immediately opened her mouth under his, her fingers sliding up into his lengthened hair, not caring who saw them.

"Harry!"

He reluctantly separated his mouth from Ginny's, seeing Ron and Hermione walking towards them. There were more hugs all round and backslapping.

"The Aurors and operatives are rounding up the Death Eaters. Some of them have actually surrendered", Hermione said breathlessly. "It's even possible some of them will give evidence, to get off more lightly. And the dragons are behaving *very* strangely. They're all sitting out there on Salisbury Plain looking like oversized nesting hens. I remember how much

trouble the handlers had with the dragons during the First Task of the Tournament. Ron said Charlie wouldn't believe his eyes if he saw them like this. Do you think they're drugged by the Death Eaters, perhaps? Maybe they gave them some kind of potion?"

With a little foot shuffling, Harry explained that he'd spoken to them through Sandy, that the dragons understood Parseltongue, and that, when he really concentrated hard and they talked slowly, he could make out Wyrmtongue, but couldn't speak it. They were shocked.

Dumbledore appeared behind Ron, reaching out and putting his hand on Harry's shoulder. He didn't seem to have heard what Harry had been saying about the dragons. "Good idea you had, there, Harry", he said with a small smile. "I never did like dementors", he added simply. Harry started to smile at him, but then he remembered Dobby.

"Where's — where's Dobby, sir? He — he saved my life —"

Dumbledore sighed. "He is on the other side of the tent with the other — casualties. I will see to it that he is returned to Hogwarts quite carefully and respectfully." His hand tightened on Harry's shoulder. "He did what a good lieutenant is trained to do; protect his general", he said quietly.

Harry had a lump in his throat which wouldn't go away. Hermione's hand had gone to her breast. "Oh, no... not *Dobby*..." She buried her face on Ron's chest and he patted her back gently, although his face said that he'd never understood Hermione's obsession with the elves. He seemed to understand Harry's grief, though, in that Dobby had died for him.

"He was a good little bloke", Ron said to Harry in a matter-of-fact voice. "Saved your arse in the Second Task, didn't he? I'd still be in the lake..." Ron had a feeble smile and Harry tried to smile back, but those muscles no longer seemed to function for him.

He saw Snape, Sirius and Maggie making their way through the beds now, looking exhausted. Sirius was also a bit singed, like Percy, and Snape afforded Harry a rare smile when he saw him holding Ginny. Maggie, however, looked straight ahead as she walked, a very single-minded expression on her face, but she also seemed to be in another world, seeing something the rest of them couldn't. She didn't look at her younger sister and brother at all, nor Harry and Hermione, but moved purposefully toward where Nita Anderssen sat on the edge of Katie's bed, moving her wand over Katie's ribs and murmuring something.

Maggie was clearly hesitating to say anything, and Harry thought this was odd, as she had thus far seemed to get on well with her new sister-in-law. But then Harry saw that Maggie wasn't looking at Katie. "You're here", she said softly, starting to cry. "You're really here. I — I *felt* you. I thought I felt you at the village hall, when Ron was getting his OM, but I thought I must have been mad for thinking that, and I was talking to our mum and dad and Bill and Charlie and thought maybe the family feelings I was getting were because of them... But last night — I had a dream, I've been having dreams about seeing you again... I thought it was wishful thinking —" she babbled, her voice full of tears.

Nita Anderssen stood and slowly walked around Katie's camp bed, staring at Maggie as though she was a ghost.

"Peggy..."

Suddenly the two women were holding each other and crying, although strangely, Nita didn't seem at all shocked. Harry frowned at Ginny, Hermione and Ron, but Ron was grinning ear to ear, stepping forward to put his arms around Maggie and Nita, who each hugged him in turn, still crying. Hermione and Ginny looked as mystified as Harry felt; they both shrugged. Maggie held Nita at arm's length.

"Oh, Annie, I can hardly believe it's you..."

Harry had to pick his jaw up from the ground. He started to move forward, but Hermione put her hand on his arm to stop him as Ginny surged forward.

"You — you're not Draco's cousin after all? You're — you're my sister?" Ginny said in disbelief. Nita hesitated before nodding.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. I'm — I'm dreadfully sorry. Do you hate me?" she whispered, looking fearfully at her youngest sister.

Ginny's only answer was to throw her arms around Nita's neck and cling to her. "Of course I don't. You must have had such an awful life..."

Nita separated from her, a flush under her freckles. "Well, actually, no. Not such an awful life. Except for thinking that my own family didn't want me", she whispered. "And after Ron told me why I was kidnapped, I was afraid that I might still be a target. After all, you were keeping it a secret that Peggy was a Weasley for her protection..."

Percy stood and faced her. "Then — then you're my older sister, too", he said evenly, neither hostile nor excited. She nodded.

"And you're — you're the bloke who was born on a very inconvenient day for a little girl who wanted a sixth birthday party more than a new little brother", she admitted sheepishly. "I know now that it wasn't your fault." She smiled at him.

He put his hand on her arm. "You were only six", he said logically. She laughed and pulled him into a hug now, and he laughed too, kissing her on the cheek. "Mum is going to be a basket case when she sees you", he predicted.

Nita's face fell. "Mum... Dad... Are you sure they *want* to see me?" she whispered. Ron put his hand on her shoulder.

"I told you — they didn't get rid of you, they were destroyed when you two disappeared."

Ginny touched Nita's hair for a moment. "Are you a natural blonde? How odd. In the pictures of you, when you were young, you had red hair like the rest of us..."

Nita touched her hair absentmindedly, as though she'd forgotten about it. "Oh, it's a potion. I've been taking it for years. Everyone else in the family was blond, so..."

"I can't believe you grew up with the Malfoys!" Ginny eyes were wide.

"Well, technically I didn't grow up with the Malfoys. I grew up in Sweden, only visiting Britain every few years at the holidays, if that, and when I was at Durmstrang, I was off up on the Russian border..." Nita explained.

"That's right! You went to Durmstrang!" Ginny exclaimed, her eyes wide. "If you'd gone to Hogwarts, Charlie would have recognized you right off —"

"Yes. And — and if I'd been adopted by anyone else, such as a family that *didn't* hate the Weasleys, I might have come home long before now." Her lips went very thin. "I didn't exactly have high hopes of being welcomed back with open arms, having been consorting with Malfoys..."

"But how is it you remember everything?" Maggie said incredulously. "I had a memory charm put on me. Didn't you?"

Nita shook her head. "I narrowly avoided it. I was planning to run away. I'd put a bundle of pillows and blankets in my hospital bed, to make it look like I was still there, and I was in the corner getting dressed behind a screen when the bloke who'd kidnapped us came in to put the spell on me. I don't think he ever knew he memory-charmed a pile of laundry." She

gave her sister a lopsided half-smile that reminded Harry of Ron. "I've always remembered everything", she finished quietly. "When I met Ron at St. Mungo's, I was worried that the family would reject him for being a werewolf. We spent a lot of time talking. I told him every nasty thing I'd ever heard from my aunt and uncle — especially my uncle — about the Weasleys, and Ron defended the family", she said, her hand on his arm.

"I knew something was up, though", Ron added, "and the truth finally came out, including the fact that she thought it was *Mum and Dad* who'd arranged for Pettigrew to kidnap them. I finally convinced her that wasn't how it happened, but she made me promise to keep her identity our secret for a while. She wasn't sure how her *other* mum and dad would take her finding out about all this. And — well, I went and told her that there was a chance she might be in the Prophecy, and she knew just what Prophecy I meant. So then we were *both* worried about Death Eaters finding out about her still being alive..."

"Like a certain uncle of mine", she said quietly, grimacing.

Maggie hit Ron on the chest, but not hard. "How could you not tell *me*, though? I can't believe you —"

But her Ron-scolding was interrupted by another family reunion. "Katie!" cried a familiar voice. They all turned, seeing Sam Bell making his way through the rows of beds to his daughter. She sat up on her elbows, grinning at him.

"Dad! What are you doing here?"

There was a moment of awkwardness. "Well, I was hoping..." He shuffled his feet for a moment and spoke to the ground. "I was hoping that Jeffries would help me..." He looked up and sought out Harry's eyes. "He did it for your aunt, after all..."

Nita frowned, shaking her head. "What? Jeffries did — *what?*"

Harry stepped forward to explain how Jeffries had made his aunt magical, and his idea that it was largely her belief that that was what was necessary for her to be healed of the cancer that had done it. Nita looked quizzically at Sam.

"So — is your daughter Muggle-born? You're a Muggle trying to become a wizard?"

Sam shook his head. "No. I'm a wizard. Or was. I was an Auror, in fact. But I spent ten years in Azkaban... the dementors, they..." He swallowed, unable to speak about it.

"You only went to Azkaban because Lucius Malfoy put your wife under Imperius", Harry said staunchly, then gave Nita an alarmed look. "Sorry. I know you think he's so great —"

"No, I don't", Nita corrected him. "I've learned a lot more about him recently. And while there's almost nothing he wouldn't do for family, well — let's just say that even his family members shouldn't dare to disagree with him if they know what's good for them. Aunt Cissy learned that lesson the hard way, and so did Draco..."

Harry's eyes opened wide. "Did you know where he was hiding?"

She shook her head. "Not exactly. I had my suspicions. Aunt Cissy was being very funny. And then one day he showed up in my flat, asking me a lot of weird questions about selkies and making me swear I wouldn't tell the authorities I'd seen him. I was terrified..."

Harry hit his forehead. "Mariah's mum! I forgot! What's going to happen to her now?"

"Now? What do you mean `now?' And who's Mariah?" Nita wanted to know.

Harry explained what Lucius Malfoy had done, and Nita covered her mouth in horror. "That *bastard*", she breathed through her fingers. When the explanations about the Bell family and the Kirkner family and what he'd done to them were finished, she was just shaking her head in disbelief.

"And to think that all these years, he was telling me what horrors the Weasleys were..."

"Do you think he ever realized that you *were* a Weasley?" Ginny asked in a small voice. Nita considered this.

"I don't know. Maybe Aunt Cissy would know. I just can't take it all in..."

Sam was looking at her strangely. "I think I missed something. You're another Weasley? Are you a cousin or something?" He smiled at Katie. "It's going to take me forever to learn my way around your new family. I hope you're less confused than I am, Kate."

He was gazing at Nita again, and she seemed to go pinker the longer he did this. "Sorry. I'm — I'm Annie Weasley", she said in a shaking voice. "I'm Annie Weasley", she said, her voice stronger and clearer this time, as she extended her hand to Sam. "Your son-in-law's oldest sister."

He suddenly grinned and pulled her to him in a crushing hug, ignoring her extended hand. "You are? You really are? But that means —" He looked back and forth from Nita to Maggie and back. "That means you've both been found. Oh, god", he said, covering his face with his hands and then taking them down to look at her again in disbelief. "The day we went to Ottery St. Catchpole to look for the two of you... Two little girls, just vanished... Your mum was terribly broken up about it for weeks", he told Harry. He looked at Nita again. "And now here you are..." he said in wonder.

She turned to Sam and took his hands in hers. "You were an Auror who went to Azkaban? And — and you're without magic now? Completely? But there are others who were in Azkaban for years who can do magic..."

Sam shook his head. "Not me. Depends on how much you let the dementors into your head. I reckon I wasn't strong enough..."

Nita looked with narrowed eyes back and forth between Harry and Sam, clearly thinking very hard. "But — but Harry said something", she said slowly. "About — about *belief*. Is it — is it possible that you just didn't *believe* that you could do magic after you were released from prison — and so you weren't able to? Is it possible that — you just need to believe you can still be a wizard?" she asked him breathlessly.

Katie sat up straighter, looking at her father and the woman who'd just been revealed as her sister-in-law. "What are you saying?"

Nita turned to her. "I — I could heal when I was young. Animals, humans, it didn't matter. Real *healing*. As I received more training... that went away. But I was watching Jeffries before the — well, before everything fell apart. I was watching what he did. He clearly believed in his *own* abilities, and he made other people believe in *theirs*." She looked at Sam. "Maybe I can bring back both of us", she whispered to him.

He stared at her in awe; Sam was still wearing the rough robe that had been placed on him when he was in the queue. "Maybe", he said softly, never taking his eyes from her.

Visibly trembling, she reached out and placed her hand on his head, her fingers sinking into his auburn hair. She and Sam both closed their eyes and seemed to be thinking very hard. Everyone around them was very still, watching and waiting. She never said the word *believe*, unlike Jeffries, but Harry could feel the hair standing up on the back of his neck at one point,

and there seemed to be a crackling sort of rainbow light limning Nita and Sam, especially where they were joined, her hand on his head.

Sam's eyes flew open; he looked jolted, shocked. He removed her hand from his head but held it in his as he stood, then kissed it lightly, making Nita turn deep red. He looked around as though seeing the world for the first time, an expression of amazement on his face. And Harry saw that he looked *strong*, stronger than he'd ever known him (and he wasn't in the habit of thinking of Sam as weak). Sam looked at Nita again and asked, "May I borrow your wand?"

She nodded and handed it to him; he waved it, producing gold sparks that coalesced into sparkling golden roses, which he presented to his daughter, kissing her on the head with a smile. Harry couldn't prevent the cheer that escaped his throat when he saw that, and the others quickly joined him. Percy was grinning and patting his father-in-law on the back and Maggie was hugging an amazed Nita again, saying, "You did it! You did it!"

Katie hung on her father's neck as he bent over her bed, clutching her roses in her right hand. "Oh, *Daddy!*" she choked out, half laughing, half crying, as though she were very small again, and he held her and laughed his great booming laugh. Harry couldn't resist the urge to hug Ginny again, grinning like mad. After kissing his daughter on the head one more time, Sam stood and embraced Nita.

"Thank you", he said earnestly, holding her at arms' length. She was still a bright crimson from when he'd kissed her hand.

"Oh. You're — you're welcome", she said softly, still looking shocked that it had worked.

Ginny separated herself from Harry and hugged her oldest sister, laughing. "You did it! You really are a healer!" Nita laughed with her, and Ginny told her, "You know, I always hoped I'd get to meet you. Your first name is my middle name, you know."

"Is it?" Hermione said suddenly. "Ginny Annie Weasley?"

Ginny made a face. "No, of course not. Virginia Annabel Weasley."

Hermione's mouth was saying, "Ooooh." But Harry could see that behind her face, the wheels of her mind were in motion once more. However, even as Harry thought this, Maggie pulled Snape forward and introduced him to Nita as her fiancé.

That caused another uproar amongst the people who hadn't known — unlike Ginny and Harry — that he'd proposed to her and that she'd accepted. Harry nodded and smiled at Snape, who looked quite embarrassed about the friendly approval of the Weasleys, almost as though he'd expected shocked and horrified rejection. It was a most unlikely scenario, the former Death Eater standing amidst a crowd of Gryffindors, being drawn out until he was laughing and talking animatedly, and yet Harry thought he'd never seen anything in his life — at least, this life — that felt more right.

* * *

The following days passed in a blur for Harry. It was all over the wizarding news that dragons, dementors and Death Eaters had attacked the gathering at Stonehenge and had been repelled by him, Dumbledore, Snape and the others. Ministry Wizards spent four days putting memory charms on Muggles. Charlie Weasley and other dragon-handlers managed to get the Swedish Shortsnouts back to their old reservation, with Harry's help. (Charlie was dumbfounded that Harry could speak to and be understood by the dragons, although Harry explained that he was really speaking Parseltongue.)

Six days after Dobby had been killed by Ludo Bagman, the house elves of Hogwarts held their version of a funeral for him, as was the custom. Harry had never seen anything stranger than the somber procession of small, bowed figures crossing the Hogwarts grounds, two by two, making their way to the patch of earth near the forest that had served for almost a thousand years as a graveyard for elves. He'd never noticed it before as it had always been overgrown and unkempt, the graves unmarked.

After returning to Hogwarts from Stonehenge, he had learned from Dumbledore that elves did not speak of the dead except in hushed tones, as they thought that to speak of Death would bring 'Him' round for more. (It was similar, Harry thought, to the wizarding world attitude toward saying "Voldemort".) Burials were supposed to be silent and swift, and Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny quietly followed Dumbledore and the line of elves toward the small ivy-covered patch of ground where Hagrid had already dug a hole for the unadorned wooden box that Harry had insisted upon building himself with Muggle tools, his tears seeping into the wood as he worked.

Dumbledore stood by the grave, unusually subdued in a fawn-colored robe and hat, while the elves lowered the box into the ground. Dobby's wife, Biddy, threw dirt onto the box first, her enormous eyes swimming with tears; she wore a simple little ecru dress that Hermione had acquired for her. Harry saw, as the elves stepped forward one by one, that although many of them wore small clothes now (especially those who were in the Elven Army, some of whom had been wounded at Stonehenge), the vast majority of them, male or female, still wore, like little pinafore dresses, tea towels with the Hogwarts crest.

After it was Harry's turn to throw dirt into the grave, which was very nearly full up now, he turned to Ginny, holding her tightly, unashamed of his tears, wishing elves weren't so set against speaking about death. He needed to speak about Dobby, but this was all he was going to get, this silent procession of elves throwing dirt onto Dobby's coffin.

That night he was having trouble sleeping; looking for a book to read, to tire himself out, he lit his wand and started searching through his trunk, finding instead the mismatched socks that Dobby had given him for Christmas when he was in fourth year, the socks he'd worn to the Yule Ball, even though no one except the fake Moody had been able to see them beneath his robes. Fresh sobs started punching their way out of him, so he hurriedly closed his trunk and fled down to the common room, flinging himself into a chair by the cold hearth, bringing the misshapen socks to his eyes to stem the flow of his tears. When he felt cried-out, he lit the fire with his wand and stared at it numbly, and finally, without really intending to, he opened his mouth and began to sing softly the *Kaddish* Ruth had taught him in his other life. He trailed off at the end, starting to cry again.

"I'm sorry, Dobby", he sobbed. "I'm sorry I ever said I'd strangle you for keeping me from going through the barrier to the train. I'm sorry I was cross with you for keeping my letters and performing that Hover Charm and making that Bludger come after me..."

"Why is Harry Potter crying?"

Harry jumped at the familiar voice. Standing before the fire, looking for all the world like he was moving the logs with a poker, was Dobby. Except that it wasn't Dobby, for Dobby wasn't white and misty and see-through. Or he didn't use to be like that.

Harry grinned through his tears. "Dobby! What are you doing here? House elves can become ghosts?"

Dobby turned and nodded at him. "Oh, yes. House elves are tending to feel that the housework is never really being done, you see, Harry Potter."

Harry nodded with understanding. "I can see that. But you were free. So why are *you* here? Not that I'm not glad to see you."

He lifted his large silvery eyes to Harry. "There is indeed work of Dobby's which is not done. But it is not housework, Harry Potter."

He looked down at his own ghostly clothes, baggy short trousers and a too-large shirt that reminded Harry of when he used to have to wear Dudley's old things. "Dobby had hoped that more of the elves would want to be free, you see, Harry Potter. But the elves have not asked for clothes", he said sadly. Harry sat up, gripping the arms of the chair.

"Do you — do you want me to free them, Dobby?" he asked breathlessly. Dobby gave him a huge, sappy, ghostly smile.

"Dobby would be liking that very much, Harry Potter", he said quietly. Harry swallowed the lump in his throat.

"Leave it to me, Dobby", he said. "I just need to pick the right time. And I'll need to have a lot of elf-clothes ready. Hermione, Ron and Ginny could help with that..."

Dobby's silvery lip trembled. "Oh, Harry Potter is too good to Dobby. Dobby doesn't know what to say —" he bumbled, wiping ghostly tears with the back of his ghostly hands.

"Just leave it to me", Harry said again. "I won't let you down."

"I know, Harry Potter. I know..."

He disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared, and Harry stared at the fire, feeling a sense of resolve.

He had made a promise to Dobby, and he intended to keep it.

* * *

On Saturday of that week, eight days after what was now being called The Battle of Stonehenge, the Weasleys had a huge gathering at Hog's End to welcome Nita back into the fold. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had received permission to accompany Snape and Maggie to Hogsmeade for the celebration; by the end of the weekend, Nita was actually answering to the name "Annie". Harry heard more than one person call Maggie "Peggy" and get an answer. They were also able to celebrate Ginny's upcoming seventeenth birthday, and although Harry would have liked to be alone with her, he enjoyed seeing her with her family members and so happy. Mrs. Weasley told Harry, when he asked, that she'd be glad to knit a large

quantity of small jumpers if he procured the wool for her, although he wasn't very clear about what they were for.

It was only the twenty-eighth of March; Ginny's birthday wasn't until the following Wednesday. Dumbledore had told Harry and Hermione that in light of the many Death Eaters who'd been apprehended, he had decided to very cautiously allow some of the students to go to Hogsmeade the following Saturday. Permission would be granted to of-age students only, and he would have the right to veto the privileges of any student he thought should not go, for whatever reason. Ginny would be squeaking in just under the wire, age-wise, but the trip would allow her and Harry to have another birthday celebration for her at the Three Broomsticks, with Hermione and Ron.

Unfortunately, the Head Girl and Boy were not permitted to tell anyone about the Hogsmeade weekend ahead of time, and were virtually bursting all week because of this. Ginny and Ron thought they were a bit mental at times, and said so. Even among the staff, only the heads of the houses were aware of Dumbledore's plan. But it was to be a secret until Saturday morning so that no one outside of the school would get wind of it. Dumbledore didn't want to take chances, and he also didn't want any students going to Hogsmeade who weren't permitted to do magic away from school..

The surrender of the Death Eaters involved in the Stonehenge attack had led to others giving themselves up who had had nothing to do with it. Voldemort's forces, it seemed, were being depleted daily. Plus, he no longer had dragons and dementors, not to mention Lucius Malfoy and Ludo Bagman, whose role in the Stonehenge incident was still somewhat mysterious to everyone. Rodney Jeffries and Petunia Dursley were still in St. Mungo's, (their souls, it turned out, were intact, but they were still not speaking). While Harry felt reasonably good about the way things had turned out, there were still some rather large question marks hovering over everything.

As a safety precaution, on the day of the Hogsmeade trip, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny went to the village using the tunnel under the statue of the hump-backed witch, emerging under the Honeydukes sweet shop. It was Hermione's idea not to walk to the village in the open air; Harry and Ron had argued, but Hermione had said she'd give them both detention and prevent them going if they didn't agree. When they reached the Three

Broomsticks, they discovered that Maggie and Snape had been busy in the short time they'd been there, while they had been plodding through the dusty tunnel. The pub was decorated for a birthday party for Ginny, who was utterly floored.

"I already had a party!" she exclaimed, laughing and hugging her sister.

"I know, Ginny, but you weren't really seventeen yet, and now you are. And this time your school friends are here. Or at least the ones who are older than you."

Even Draco Malfoy was there, mutely handing Ginny a small silver-wrapped gift. She thanked him but did not open it, placing it with a pile of other unopened presents. At one point, looking around the busy room with interest and drinking a butterbeer, Ginny asked him, "So, where's Mariah? She had her birthday in February. I don't think I've seen her."

Draco's mouth was drawn very thin. "Professor Dumbledore didn't think it would be a good idea for her to come."

Ginny puzzled over this for a moment, before say, "Oh, I see. Because —"

"— because her selkie skin hasn't turned up, yes. Nor her mum", he confirmed grimly, knocking back something in a hip flask that Harry didn't think was butterbeer. Soon after they had returned from Stonehenge, Draco Malfoy had been permitted to attend his father's funeral, and he'd been very subdued ever since. His father had indeed died from his fall. Harry hadn't revealed to Draco his own role in Lucius Malfoy's death, though he knew that he wasn't technically to blame. If Malfoy hadn't been trying to curse *him*...

Harry turned from Draco, unable to meet his gaze. He walked to the bar to get a packet of crisps to share with Ginny, but when he returned to their table, she wasn't there.

"Where's —?" he began to say, but suddenly, Maggie's thoughts were in his mind.

She's left the pub.

Harry glanced at her across the table, where she sat very cozily with Severus Snape, drinking some elderflower wine.

Why? It's her party.

Follow her down the High Street. Look casual about it. Try not to draw attention to yourself. The rest of the family are at the Burrow today.

What? he thought at her, confused.

Stop doing that.

Stop doing what?

Making that face. People will work out what we're doing. Just do as I told you.

Harry swallowed, putting down the crisps. "I'm just — erm, be right back", he said feebly, walking quickly toward the door of the pub before anyone could ask him a question.

When he was standing on the threshold of the pub, he looked up and down the High Street, finally seeing her standing and looking in a shop window, although she didn't really look remotely interested in anything she was seeing. He saw her gaze flicker at him out of the corner of her eye before she turned and continued to stroll down the cobblestone pavement. He began to move at an equally leisurely pace, wondering what was going on, but willing to follow her anywhere; he would have followed her to the moon and back.

When she took a step, he took a step; when she paused to look in another shop window, he paused to look in the nearest window; at one point he discovered that he was actually looking into the parlor of an old witch who had lifted her robes to adjust her tights, and she glared at him, closing the curtains with a flick of her hand. He backed up guiltily, turning and seeing that Ginny had begun to walk down the drive of Hog's End. Now she turned her head and met his gaze, saying nothing, not even gesturing, but beckoning him with her eyes. He continued to walk forward again, continuing to look into those large, dark eyes, which were drawing nearer and nearer...

When he was only ten feet away, she turned casually and walked toward the door. She whispered a password and then opened the heavy oak front door, pausing, waiting for him. When he was on the threshold, she finally moved forward into the entrance hall. He closed and locked the door securely behind them. She had already started walking upstairs, and he followed, watching her swaying hips before him, feeling more and more excited by her purposeful movements, her unerring determination. When they reached the room that had been his in his other life, he followed her in and closed the door.

Harry approached her and ran his hand up her arm tentatively, then along her shoulder to her neck; he could feel her pulse very strongly. Her

heart seemed to be going a mile a minute. He wasn't exactly cool, calm and collected; he kept feeling as though he had to remind himself to breathe. He slowly pulled her mouth to his, and she was ready immediately, no hesitation at all, no questioning any more, although he could feel her shaking with nerves. Her fingers fluttered to the hem of his shirt, and the first contact they made with the skin on his stomach startled him and made him flinch. They continued to kiss deeply while she moved her quivering hands up his chest, and he moaned into her mouth as she made contact with more and more of his bare skin, and then flicked across his nipples. The two of them broke apart briefly for her to pull the shirt over his head, then her lips attached themselves to his neck, as though she would drink his life's blood. Her nerves were starting to ease a bit and he gasped from the combination of her mouth and hands. When his fingers went to unfasten her blouse, she helped him, every other button released by him, the rest by her.

Somehow, this teamwork to take her clothes off completely undid him. He gathered her to him again, twining his hand in her hair, taking her bottom lip between his teeth, gently, running his tongue along her jaw line and up to her earlobe. She trembled in his arms when he did that, then trembled more when he moved his mouth down her neck, and further...

She stepped back from him for only a moment, removing her skirt as though it was an annoyance, and helping him remove his trousers. But then she was back, and when he brought his lips down on her neck again and held her to him by putting his hands around her waist, she ran her hands over his shoulders and arms, his chest and back, over and over, the caresses frantic yet focused, seeming quite calculated to drive him mad. He moved his hands further down, cupping her bottom tenderly, pulling her against him, and she sighed happily and tried to move closer still, which made him gasp; did she *know* what she'd just done? he wondered. But then he looked down into her face, her beautiful, mischievous face, and from the sly expression there, he knew that she *had* known, that it was quite deliberate, and as she pulled him to her again, receiving him in the welcoming hollow of her belly, he wanted to kiss her breathless to both punish and reward her...

Instead, she pulled away from him again and walked toward the bed, holding out her hand to him, and he took it, following her. He remembered seeing her in the Potions Dungeon in his fifth year, after he'd thought

Malfoy had attacked her (and now he knew that he really had, to a certain extent); he remembered carrying her to Madam Pomfrey afterward, his heart aching for her. She looked so different now, so self-possessed and confident as she stood next to the bed. Not taking her eyes from him, she removed her bra. He reached down and removed her last garment, pulling the elastic down over her legs slowly and deliberately, and then she did the same for him. (He had to remind himself to breathe again as she hesitated for a moment before standing.) They stood facing each other, very close, not touching, without any more barriers between them, no more obstacles. Harry couldn't take it any more, and at the same moment she lunged for him, he pulled her to his body, and now they were kissing each other more passionately than they'd yet dared, no holding back or being coy, no nervousness or second thoughts.

Their hands and mouths no longer felt that any territory was off-limits; Harry grinned when she tipped her head back and let a low moan escape her, and he almost yelped in surprise when she tentatively reached out a shaking hand to touch him; it hadn't occurred to him she would do that, somehow, but moments later, as she gained confidence and moved her hand and his mind spun, he was very, very glad she had...

They tumbled onto the bed, which quickly became a shambles from their rolling over and twisting around; every square inch of skin needing to be explored, it seemed, with kisses and caresses, lips and tongues and fingers. At length, Harry made her lie back while he started at her toes and began to move up her legs, tracing her long calves with his tongue, scraping his teeth across her knee. She was propped up on her elbows, watching him at first, but as he moved higher, she collapsed and arched her back, repeating his name in a litany that he never wanted to end. Finally, reduced to moans and whimpers, Harry felt her shivering, and he feared that she was cold; but then she tensed up all over her body, and gave a throaty cry which almost undid all of his attempts at self-control.

He moved up toward her face, trailing kisses along her body as he went, until he reached her mouth at last and took possession of that once more — only to find that *he* was the one being possessed. He whispered his feelings for her in her ear, and she whispered hers back, and they were the same, they could have come from the same mind and same heart. He felt an ache in his chest as he thought of how long they'd waited for this, and he kissed her again and again, making up for lost time; he felt like he

could never do enough to show how much he loved her. She accepted his kisses and, separating their mouths briefly, whispered in his ear, "Now," sending a thrill through him.

And then it was as though they'd always been one contiguous body, as though this was the norm and the past separateness had been the aberration, for how could he ever want to be apart from her when being one with her was such bliss? It was as though they breathed with shared lungs, as though his heart was pumping blood for her body, as though her larynx was crying out what they both felt, as his mouth was clamped on her neck...

They moved in concord, in unison, as though following a choreography that had been programmed into their marrow from the day they were born. And when they started to tumble from the heights of passion, they were still one, and Harry knew it would be a wrench to be a separate, discrete person again, to use his own lungs instead of hers, to see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears. They lay together on their sides, dreamily running their fingers along arms and legs, along shoulders and the luscious curve of a breast... a satisfyingly complete feeling filled Harry, and he knew that separating from her was merely a physical formality that belied the truth of their connectedness. He lay on his back and she stretched out beside him, languid as a cat, ginger hair flowing down her back. She put her head on his chest, sending him flying again briefly when her fingers drifted down his body...

He smiled down at her; no, he thought. *Grinned*. He felt as though he would never merely *smile* again. This was Ginny, at last. Ginny in his arms and covering his body with hers, then the two of them combining again with undiluted ardor, with all of the enthusiasm of their first time. Just when he thought she *must* have sapped every last ounce of strength from *him*, she would kiss him again and he would feel a surge of energy start to well up from some unknown, previously-untapped inner source...

At length they did dress and went to sit together on the window seat. Clothes seemed incidental now. They touched each other freely through the layers of fabric, or simply sat resting their hands places they wouldn't have dreamed of touching before, just *being* together, and happier than they ever remembered.

He leaned his cheek on her hair and looked down the High Street. Their oneness would surely show when they went back, he thought. He had no

idea how he could bear to be apart from her for more than a few minutes ever again. He looked down at her and felt he could never grow tired of looking at her; he imagined her growing older, and greying, and getting smile lines around her mouth and eyes, and he knew that she would be more beautiful than ever, and it didn't matter that they wouldn't be seventeen forever, because the best was yet to come...

"How long were you planning this?" he asked her, stroking her arm absentmindedly.

She looked thoughtful. "For about — two minutes before I left the pub. While you were at the bar, Maggie had asked me what I really wanted for my birthday, and Professor Snape was sitting right there, so I couldn't really say *this*, you know?" she said, blushing. "So Maggie asked me without words instead, and I admitted that I had hoped to spend some time alone with you. So she told me that Hog's End was empty and recommended that I just go there. Come here, that is. She said she'd send you on after me."

"And the rest is history —" he grinned, hugging her to him tightly.

She hugged him back and kissed his neck, then settled against him, looking out the window with a contented smile; however, a moment later she stiffened and looked as though she'd seen a ghost.

"What's wrong?" he whispered. She pointed out the window toward the village, her eyes very wide and her face drained of color.

Draco Malfoy stood in the road, glaring up at the two of them, looking more furious and murderous than anyone Harry had ever seen. Harry's mind felt like it was waking from hibernation.

"Get up, Ginny", he said urgently, and she did as he asked without question. Harry stayed where he was while Ginny went to stand near the bed, and Malfoy walked closer and closer to the house. Harry watched him move up the drive toward the door. Harry finally stood and turned to Ginny.

"I'm going down to talk to him. Wait here."

She seemed to have recovered from her initial shock. "No, Harry. I'm coming with you. He needs to face this, to face *us*. It may seem cruel, but — he needs to hear from *me* that this is how things are. He had to know this would happen eventually. And even though he's got Mariah, well — he'll be angry. I mean — I never — with him —"

Harry looked down at the pale, pointed face, swallowing, knowing that this was going to be very bad, worse than when they'd been discovered in Hagrid's hut. "No, Ginny. He's not angry; he's *livid*. He still thinks he owns you, even after everything he's done, everything that's happened. It's not that he has a right to be, but he's going to feel absolutely *violated* by our being together, as much as if we'd done this when you two were still a couple. Do you get that? Do you remember how you felt about him and Mariah? Or, more to the point, about *me* and Mariah? Are you ready to face a Draco Malfoy who feels that way? You stay up here", he said with finality, standing and walking toward the door.

She ran to intercept him, her jaw set stubbornly. "I am *not* staying here. He has no right to judge me. We're not together any more and he knows that even when we were I was only doing it to protect you, that I've always loved *you*. I can make my own decisions about this, Harry, and not just because I'm seventeen now", she informed him, her fists on her waist. "I should think you'd want me with you to confront him. I've seen him in some very vulnerable situations, Harry, and I'm not frightened of Draco Malfoy."

He swallowed, seeing in his mind's eye the look Malfoy had worn on his face as he walked down the drive.

Well, he thought; *at least that makes one of us*.

Confessional

Harry opened the front door of Hog's End. He had expected Draco Malfoy to be on the threshold, but instead he was halfway down the drive, where Harry had seen him when he'd still been upstairs. Ginny seemed unsurprised by this; she took his hand after he closed the door and nodded at him. They walked toward Malfoy, who was behaving very oddly, his hands pushing at the air as though it was solid.

As they drew nearer, Harry's instinctive defensive reaction — sarcasm — rose to the surface. "Thinking of a new career, Malfoy? Not a bad idea — you wouldn't even need to paint your face white to be a mime, although that stuck-in-an-invisible box routine is rather old-hat, don't you think?" Harry wished his voice wasn't shaking, and he started to inch his hand toward the pocket where he kept his wand.

Malfoy stopped what he was doing and glowered at Harry. "For your information, there seems to be some sort of shield charm preventing me from getting any closer to the house. Convenient for you, eh? Worried that I'd hit you again? Where's that Gryffindor bravery?" he mocked.

"And for *your* information", Ginny said acidly, "Harry didn't know anything about the shield charm. My brothers did it, and they put one around my mum and dad's house as well. You don't think Percy, Fred, and George would do what they do for a living without some security? Plus George has Angelina and their kids to think of."

Malfoy crossed his arms and raised one eyebrow. "Can't you let me through? I just want to talk... I don't want to hurt anyone..."

Ginny smirked. "That's a lie. The only reason you're aware of the charm at all is that you are intending harm to someone on Hog's End property. That's why Harry didn't even know the charm was there. And that's why it's not letting you get any farther."

"It's not considered 'harm' to do what *he's* done to *you*? But then, I reckon you've been harmed by him that way before, so it hardly matters now, does it?" he sneered.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded, crossing her arms.

"Well, it's obvious that you snuck away here to get in some shagging!" he spat. "Couldn't wait until you got back to the castle? *Is* there a room in

the castle you haven't used for that yet?"

Ginny's jaw dropped. "We — how dare you —"

Malfoy gave her a look of utter contempt. "Everyone knows about you two, after Potter's little 'suspension' problem. The staff wing! God, you've got nerve, Potter. You think you can get away with anything and everything, don't you? Of course, it was also obvious that Snape suspending you was merely for show, to get you out of the castle. To get you away from *me*, and possibly Mariah. We must protect *precious Harry Potter* at all costs, after all. Nothing must happen to *our Harry*", he said in an annoying sing-song.

Harry was looking at Malfoy with his mouth open. "Wh-what?" he sputtered, unable to put into words just how off some of Malfoy's accusations were. The problem was, they weren't *all* off. Especially the part about getting him out of the castle to protect him.

Ginny, however, had found a way to put her indignation into words. "For your information, this afternoon was the first time that we —" She suddenly realized what she was saying and stopped abruptly, turning deep red and looking away from him. Malfoy burst out laughing.

"Oh my *god*. Are you telling me it took him *this long*? That's just too funny. And here I — and everyone else in the school, I might add", he said, clearly enjoying the way Ginny was turning an even deeper red, "thought the two of you were constantly sneaking off to make the beast with two backs. Well, Miss Weasley, that'll teach you to throw off a Slytherin. At least your sister might possibly be enjoying some *proper* and regular shagging, with Snape. I still might be willing to give you a chance, willing to overlook your having been polluted by *this*", he said, waving his hand at Harry and making a disgusted face. "There might be some charms we could do to get his *smell* off you..."

Harry started to lunge at him, but Ginny pulled him back, hissing under her breath, "*Don't. The charm will be broken.*"

"Oh, I'm so *lucky* Ginny is here to protect me from you, Potty", Malfoy drawled. "Whatever would I have done if she *weren't*?" He made a tragic face, then changed it abruptly into an evil grin. "Curse the pants off you, that's what. Wanker", he threw in for good measure.

Harry swallowed, wanting to curse Malfoy more than he'd ever wanted to curse anyone, but there was something in his eyes that was slightly

disturbing, something that made his taunts sound a little less than sincere. He was hiding something.

"Why did you really follow us here, Malfoy? What's your game?" he said softly, watching his opponent's face very carefully, should he give anything away.

There it was — a frightened flash in the eyes, gone in a blink. "You'll never know now, Scarhead. Why should I —" He stopped abruptly, as though he'd almost said too much. Harry seized on this.

"Why should you what? What I'd like to know is why you should care at all about what Ginny and I do when we're alone together. You should be concerning yourself with Mariah — she's the one who needs you right now."

"I've done nothing *but* worry about Mariah!" he shouted suddenly. "Why do you think —" He stopped and bit his lip. "Never mind", he said quickly. "It's not as though you care about anyone but yourselves anyway..."

Harry drew his mouth into a line and stepped toward Malfoy, heedless of whether he might break through the shield charm. "But we *do* care. About Mariah. And —" He looked at Draco Malfoy, who suddenly looked very young and very frightened. "And we care about you too. I doubt that you want Voldemort to use that Obedience Charm on you any more than any of us want him to use Mariah's selkie skin to make her do awful things." Malfoy didn't answer him but had a skeptical expression on his face; he glared mistrustfully at Harry, who shook his head at him. "You know, we have more in common than you think." He grinned. "I found out a fair bit about the Founders when I was suspended. Sirius' mum knows a lot, things even Hermione couldn't find in the Restricted Section of the school library. According to Mrs. Black, I'm a descendent of one of Godric Gryffindor's daughters. Did you know that we — you and I — have both Malfoy and Gryffindor blood?"

Draco Malfoy stepped back and made a face at Harry. "Did Granger and Bell know that shagging made you insane and forget to tell the rest of us?"

Harry laughed, explaining to him that Godric Gryffindor's illegitimate son bore his mother's name, Malfoy, and that the daughters he had with his wife were also half Malfoy, because that was his wife's family name. Draco Malfoy looked like he wanted to spew.

"Are you telling me that I'm part Gryffindor? Do you think that's a way to get on my *good* side?"

Harry tried not to laugh at his expression. "And I'm part Malfoy. Well, going back about a thousand years. And the brothers who married Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were named Weasley. Ravenclaw's son married the half-sister of Godric Gryffindor's son, remember. And *she* was half Malfoy. Back then, they all got along..."

Malfoy sneered at him. "They didn't all get along if you count Slytherin's bride shagging Gryffindor, and Slytherin cursing her. Not exactly what *I'd* call getting along."

"I meant once Slytherin had gone..."

Malfoy glared at him. "Just as you'd like me to be gone. Oh, you'd like it, wouldn't you, if I just turned down a direct order from the Dark Lord and dropped dead. You'd really love that! How *convenient* that would be for you..."

"No I wouldn't love that!" Harry said hotly, momentarily surprised to realize that he meant it. But he was still angry with Malfoy for being so *stubborn*. "Listen, whether you like it or not, I saw what you were capable of in my other life, what sort of person you *could* be. You don't *have* to be this way! You could choose to be —"

"*You have no idea what it is to be me!*" Draco Malfoy hissed at him through clenched teeth. "Don't you *dare* tell me about *choices*! If I had a choice, do you think I'd —" He looked like he'd literally bitten his tongue; he turned away from Harry, looking down at his hands, which were shaking.

Harry had a sudden revelation. "*What has he asked you to do?*" he whispered fearfully. "He's done it, hasn't he? Given you an order. When was it? When you went away for your dad's funeral?" Malfoy turned; his eyes flared wide, as though Harry had hit the mark. "*What has he asked you to do?*" Harry demanded again, trying very hard to resist the urge to take the other boy by the shoulders.

Malfoy opened his mouth to say something, but this time Harry actually *saw* his teeth close on his tongue and bite down hard, drawing blood. Malfoy sank to his knees and a ribbon of blood dribbled out of his mouth and down his chin. All of Harry's hostility drained away as he lurched forward, breaking through the shield charm, and sank down with Malfoy, staring helplessly at him. Ginny was at his side in a trice. "Okay!"

Harry said. "You can't tell us, I get that. He's put some spell on you, or it's part of the Obedience Charm — he could have ordered you not to tell, and you agreed, so even if you wanted to tell you couldn't..."

Harry felt awful, remembering how frustrating it had been when he'd agreed to follow Tom Riddle, how unnerving it had been when his feet seemed to move of their own accord, and how it had been even more unnerving when he hadn't been able to hurt Riddle, no matter how hard he tried.

"Is that why you followed us? You were coming to us — for help?" Harry whispered to him now. Malfoy still held his eyes wide open; he looked almost as though he was trying to nod, but he was quite incapable of doing anything to answer in the affirmative. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but a split second later, he was growling in pain as his teeth closed on his own tongue once more, and Ginny put her arms around his shoulders, her face white with fear.

"We need to get you to Snape", Harry said quickly. "He'll know what to do." Malfoy let him help him to stand, but they hadn't gone three steps together when both Harry and Draco let out howls of pain and sank to their knees again. Ginny was at a loss for what to do; she stared at the two of them, Harry holding his scar, feeling as though his head would burst in two, and Draco Malfoy holding his left forearm with his right hand, looking like he wished he could rip his own arm off to rid himself of the pain...

Harry had to close his eyes against the pain; it felt as though someone had taken a cleaver to his head and split it in two. Amidst the pain, however, some images were starting to become clear. He could see Voldemort pressing his wand to a man's forearm, turning the Dark Mark there deepest black, summoning his remaining servants. And then Harry saw who the man with the Mark was.

Wormtail.

He was in a chair, trussed up, immobile, his left arm lying along the arm of the chair. The soft pale skin of the inner forearm was facing up, showing the gruesome tattoo, the Mark of his servitude. There was a gag in his mouth and Harry could see that his eyes were wide with pain. Voldemort had made Wormtail his servant again, and he was once more finding him useful.

Suddenly, Draco shook them off and Harry opened his eyes, struggling to see what was going on in the world around him, all the while still feeling that excruciating pain ripping through his head. Draco stood and pulled out his wand; before they could do anything, he disappeared with a *pop!* Harry collapsed against Ginny, his head still aching; when he closed his eyes, he couldn't see Draco Malfoy, though. He wasn't with Voldemort. That was something at least. The question was — where *had* he gone?

Suddenly, the pain in his head subsided and he took deep breaths, feeling exhausted. He looked into Ginny's dark, worried eyes. "*Snape.*" He grabbed her hand and started running toward the Three Broomsticks. Ginny struggled to keep up with him.

"But Draco's gone! How would he know —"

"*He has the Mark too!*" Harry reminded her as they ran. "*He'll know where Voldemort is!*"

Ginny closed her mouth with a snap when she heard that, and sped up, keeping pace with him now. When they reached the pub, it was like they were swimming upstream, there were so many people running out the door. When they finally managed to slip inside, they found Snape on the floor next to the table where he'd been sitting; his head was in Maggie's lap and he was clutching his left forearm through his robes, which he had not pushed up, so his Mark was still concealed. His face was dripping with sweat and he was even paler than usual, if that was possible. Harry assumed that, like Draco Malfoy, he had screamed when his Mark had been activated by Voldemort, and that was why the pub patrons had fled. Harry crouched before him, putting his hand on his shoulder; he remembered how painful it was to have the Dark Mark and to be summoned by Voldemort, and hated thinking about Snape experiencing that now. But — because of Snape still having the Mark, they might be able to find Voldemort.

He made sure he kept his voice low, because of the remaining people in the pub, backing away in fear. "Malfoy felt it too, and he Disapparated!" Harry whispered urgently. "Do you know where Voldemort is, where he wants the Death Eaters to go?"

Severus Snape swallowed and lifted dark pain-filled eyes to Harry, nodding grimly.

"Little Hangleton."

Harry clamped his mouth shut. *Of course*. He nodded, then said, "Have you been feeling this much? Has he been summoning Death Eaters often? For some reason my scar hasn't been hurting..."

Snape drew in his breath and pressed his hand to his forearm again; when the pain seemed to subside he said tersely, "No, this is the first in months. But — intelligence reports have said that his lieutenants were carrying on most of the work for him. Malfoy, and another." *Bagman*, Harry thought, picturing his face again just before he was sucked into Limbo. "He seemed to be — worried about something, and keeping his distance from Britain... I think that since Stonehenge, he's come back."

"He might have been worried that Dumbledore would — would try to use *his* scar again, to get at him", Harry whispered. Snape nodded.

"You're probably right."

Harry realized that, in a way, what Dumbledore had done had worked. It had driven Voldemort away for fear of Dumbledore doing *that* again. "Which meant he was too far away for me to feel anything in *my* scar when he was feeling a lot of emotion..."

Yet again, Snape grabbed his arm, followed by him uttering a stream of some of the filthiest swearing Harry had ever heard, although it was under his breath, very deliberate and even. Harry made a face, horrified by the pain he knew was coursing through Snape.

"Doesn't he usually stop by now?" Harry whispered. He remembered falling out of the sky when he was flying as a golden griffin, in his other life; after a while the extraordinary pain had ceased. But very abruptly, Harry didn't need Snape to answer him — he knew.

It was Harry's turn to cry out and grab his scar; he collapsed against the table leg and squeezed his eyes shut in pain, seeing Voldemort again and the trussed-up Wormtail. Others had arrived in the meantime; they were in what seemed to be a large drawing room with elaborate moldings from which gilt was peeling in curling strips; an enormous overmantel fronted a cold fireplace. *There are so many Death Eaters there already*, Harry thought. *Why is he still summoning them?*

But a moment later, he found out why; he was still waiting for a very *particular* Death Eater.

Draco Malfoy.

When he entered, Harry noticed him right away. Malfoy was trying to hide in the rear of the crowd, near the door, but Voldemort saw him

immediately; the nervous crowd parted, exposing Draco and allowing Voldemort to cross the room and survey him critically.

"So", the peculiar high-pitched voice said slowly; "we've decided not to die today."

Malfoy nodded, visibly shaking. "I — I knew you would keep your word, M'Lord. You said you would —"

"You thought you would *bargain* with me?" the red-eyed wizard suddenly said, interrupting. Draco Malfoy froze. His mouth worked soundlessly as he tried to formulate a response, but a moment later Voldemort was pouring out that cruel, high laugh. "Of course I will keep my word, to a *loyal* Death Eater. As your father was, in the end. Although I fail to see what *you* see in that girl you go to such effort to protect... She comes from bad blood. You know she does", he practically spat.

"She's — she's pureblood. Please, M'Lord —" Draco whispered. Something like a smile split Voldemort's gruesome visage in two.

"It is right here." Harry recognized Macnair, the Ministry executioner; he brought forth a bulky parcel wrapped in brown paper and string. With a suspicious look, Macnair handed the parcel to Draco, who seemed very relieved to have it.

"*But!*" Voldemort cried suddenly, his voice cutting the air like a machete. "That is *yours* now. It is your property. I order you *not* to give it away." He stared meaningfully at Draco Malfoy, who swallowed and nodded.

"Yes, M'Lord. I shall not give it away. It is mine."

One corner of Voldemort's mouth curved up in a sinister half-smile. "As *you* are mine, Moon Child."

In the chair, the trussed-up Wormtail squirmed suddenly, shaking his head and staring with wild eyes at Draco; he was gagged, so he could not speak, but urgent high-pitched grunts were trying to get past the gag. Voldemort merely pointed at him and he suddenly sagged; it seemed to Harry that he was still breathing, but it was difficult to tell. Draco Malfoy was biting his lip and regarding Peter Pettigrew nervously.

"Yes, M'Lord", he said to Voldemort, still shaking slightly. "I am yours."

"*Aaah!*"

Harry's scream hurt his throat. He gazed up at the ceiling of the Three Broomsticks; for some reason he was lying on the floor and he was very

cold and wet. Hermione and Ron stood over him with pitchers; evidently, they'd both thrown ice-cold water over him. Harry took off his glasses and saw that they needed a new Impervius Charm.

"What was that for?" he demanded angrily, running his hand down his face and blinking the water out of his eyes.

"What do you mean, what was that for?" Hermione asked him, incredulous. "You were screaming non-stop and holding your scar —"

Harry's brow furrowed. "I was?" That explained the throat pain. He tentatively touched his scar, which was hot and tender. "I saw — I saw Malfoy. With Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Macnair gave him something and Voldemort said that Malfoy was his and Malfoy agreed", he said very fast, trying not to speak too loudly.

Suddenly, Ginny appeared from the vicinity of the bar carrying a bottle of butterbeer. She stopped short, staring at Harry, soaking wet, still on the floor next to Snape, whose arm seemed to have ceased hurting. "What did you do?" she demanded of Ron and Hermione.

"He needed more than butterbeer, Ginny", Hermione said sheepishly.

"Yeah", Ron agreed, giving Harry a somewhat hostile look. "Besides — considering what I know about what the pair of you have been up to, that was very satisfying", he added rather smugly, his nostrils flaring.

"Ron!" Maggie said angrily, as though she'd had years of practice at being his older sister and not less than a year. "You've no business —"

"And you do? Have business messing about with their private lives, I mean", Ron added.

"This isn't the time!" Snape snarled at them both suddenly; Maggie scowled at him. He ignored her and turned to Harry. "You saw him", he said softly. It wasn't a question.

"Yeah. I — I could *see* Malfoy! With *him*! He *went* there. I — I think I must have been screaming because he — he had been putting Cruciatus on — on Wormtail —"

"He has Pettigrew?" Snape said quickly, sweat beading on his upper lip. Harry nodded.

"I'll put a silencing charm on myself. If Voldemort does something in anger again, I may be able to find out more", Harry said, starting to aim his wand at his own throat.

"No, Harry, let me", Hermione said. "I know something that will keep you from hurting your throat; a silencing charm will just keep us from

hearing you scream." He nodded and let her put the charm on him. He climbed back into his chair and they sat around the table, Ginny holding his hand tightly, her face very pale. But after a few minutes, it seemed that nothing more would be communicated to Harry through his scar. He shrugged and nodded at Hermione, pointing at his throat, and she took the spell off him again.

"I guess it was too much to hope for", he said. "Of *course* the one time I'm *hoping* to have my scar hurt, so I can see what he's up to, nothing happens..."

Ron looked a bit embarrassed by his earlier reaction. "Sorry, Harry." He also looked sheepishly at his sister. "And you too, Ginny. I'm — sorry for — the way I reacted." He was very red and Harry could barely hear him, his voice was so soft. "It's not like you didn't tell me repeatedly that I should prepare myself..."

Harry nodded, his arm around Ginny. "You know I love Ginny very much, Ron? And that I would never hurt her?" Ginny looked at her brother with large hopeful eyes and Ron nodded, tight-lipped, as Hermione took his hand in hers and gave him a gentle smile. Maggie was also watching Ron closely.

"I know, I know", he admitted at last. Heaving a great sigh, he said, "I reckon we should cut our visit short and go tell Dumbledore what happened. With Malfoy."

"Right", Harry agreed. Snape nodded at him and the six of them rose to leave. However, they hadn't gone more than a few feet down the High Street when a searing pain ripped through Harry's head again; Voldemort wasn't done...

A man whose face he couldn't see was on the floor of the same room he'd seen earlier, writhing in pain while Voldemort trained his wand on him; Harry could see the amber light crackling and he put his hands over his ears to avoid hearing the man's unearthly cries. It did no good, however, for Harry wasn't really hearing the man's anguish through his ears.

At length, Voldemort lifted his wand and demanded of the spent man at his feet, "Tell me why I no longer have my dragons! Tell me why I no longer have my dementors! Tell me why you Apparated back *here* instead of staying at Stonehenge to *fight*!" Spit flew from his mouth as his voice rose on an infuriated shriek, and out of the corner of his eye Harry was

aware of the man, no longer being cursed, scuttling backward on all fours, like a crab. The assembled Death Eaters backed away, widening the circle around him, but Harry was focusing on Malfoy, whom he had spotted in the crowd, no longer the focus of Voldemort's wrath.

However, despite the fact that he was off the hook for now, Draco Malfoy stepped forward. He didn't flinch from Voldemort's eerie red stare.

"*What is it?*" he spat impatiently.

Draco Malfoy whispered, "*Harry Potter.*"

Voldemort's odd snake-like face started twitching madly; a tic suddenly made his right eye wink uncontrollably. "*What about him?*" he snapped at Malfoy, who looked utterly confident in what he was doing. His father had been in Voldemort's inner circle and he appeared to be ready to take up that position now.

"I have it on good authority that it was Harry Potter who told Dumbledore how to get rid of the dementors, and that he also turned the dragons, M'Lord", he said, his voice clear and cold, sounding rather pleased about telling Voldemort this. "He spoke to them."

Voldemort stared at Malfoy and walked toward him, his already-inhuman features twisted in an expression of utter confusion. "He *spoke* to them?" In the process of walking toward Malfoy, he happened to step on the Death Eater he'd just been torturing. When the man cried out in an oddly high-pitched voice, Voldemort turned and pointed his wand at him again, once more pronouncing the dreaded incantation with a chilling casualness.

Harry's screaming seemed (at least to him) to go on forever. Finally, he opened his eyes and blinked up at the five people crouched around him.

"What was it?" Snape breathed, his dark eyes anxious.

"Malfoy", Harry croaked, barely able to speak. "He's — he's telling Voldemort that it's all my fault. The dragons being gone, and the dementors, too. He — he doesn't seem like such a reluctant Death Eater these days", Harry added, trying to let go forever of his memories of Draco Malfoy from his other life. The boy who had been biting his tongue, trying to tell them what was going on, might as well have not existed.

Ron was turning deep red with fury. "That little ferrety *bastard*. When I get my hands on him —"

"Let us concentrate on returning to the castle at this time, Mr. Weasley", Snape said sternly, helping Harry to his feet. "The headmaster

should be told about all of this."

Ron clamped his mouth shut. Through tight lips he managed to squeeze out the grudging words, "Yes, sir." He glanced irritably at his older sister, as though dying to demand of her how she had agreed to marry *Snape*, but he held his tongue.

The walk to Hogwarts from Hogsmeade had never seemed longer; Harry was itching to change to his griffin form and fly ahead, possibly taking Ginny along for the ride, but he forced himself to walk. He didn't want to risk changing back when he was in mid-air. Voldemort's fury could rip through his scar again at any moment, and if Ginny were riding on his back, she'd be in danger, too. He glanced at her, walking by his side. She gave him a small smile and laced her fingers through his.

"*Just think about — earlier,*" she said softly. He knew she was trying to help, but he shook his head.

"*I wish I could, but — no,*" was all he said. The perfection of the afternoon had been shattered by their seeing Draco Malfoy outside Hog's End, and everything had been downhill after that. He *could* wallow in thinking about their first time together, but that would be selfish and counterproductive. They had other things to worry about now.

Such as Draco Malfoy angling to take his father's place at Voldemort's side.

When they finally reached the castle, Harry dragged himself up the stone steps, feeling like all of his strength had been sapped, and waited for Ron to open the heavy door. Filch was waiting in the entrance hall, a parchment in hand; he'd been sitting in a wooden chair, tipped back on the rear legs, snoring loudly, his feet on a cupboard door (the same cupboard, Harry remembered, where he and Ron had stashed the drugged Crabbe and Goyle when they'd impersonated them using Polyjuice Potion). When Ron closed the heavy door, Filch jerked awake and his chair came crashing down on the stone flags.

"Wha — what's going on? What are you lot doing back from Hogsmeade already?" His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Thought you'd get up to some *mischief* in the castle, and try to use being in the village as your alibi, did you? Well — oh, erm. Hello there, Professor Snape", he said awkwardly, jumping to his feet, worrying his parchment between his fingers, having just noticed the Potions master standing behind Ron (they were roughly the same height). The switch from bossy to servile was so

sudden Harry wondered whether he might get whiplash. He felt like telling him that he'd forgotten to tug on his forelock — not that he had one anymore.

"We have returned because we have business with the headmaster. So if you would please mark these students as having returned, I would appreciate it. We don't have time to waste", Snape said tersely. Filch nodded, examining the parchment closely.

"Right, right, o' course, Professor Snape..." Harry felt jumpy and nervous as he waited for Filch to check their names off. But instead of just passing them, he peered over the top of the parchment with suspicion. "Was they all in the village with you and Miss Dougherty, Professor Snape?" he said slowly, with that creak in his voice that made Harry's stomach clench.

"Yes, yes. Be quick about it, man!" Snape told him, his voice rising.

Filch perused the list once more, then raised his eyes to Snape's, a smug smile (of sorts) twisting the corners of his thin, bitter mouth. "You might be interested to know, Professor, that none of them signed out proper-like before leaving the castle. And that *she* — " he said more loudly, pointing a bony finger at Ginny, "didn't even have leave to go to the village at all!" He looked at Snape with large glaring eyes, reminding Harry absurdly of his own cat, Mrs. Norris, with her lamp-like eyes.

Ginny's jaw dropped. "Of course I had leave to go to the village! I just turned seventeen!"

Hermione stepped forward now, a little white. In a shaking voice, she said, "I'm afraid this is partly my and Harry's fault, Mr. Filch. As Head Girl and Boy, we took it on ourselves to take extra security precautions, and so we left the castle a different way. We didn't want to be seen going to the village in broad daylight... But right now we *really* need to see Professor Dumbledore. Surely all of this can be worked out later..."

But he pointed at Ginny again. "That still doesn't excuse *her* for being out of bounds! Only students who are of-age were supposed to go, and she's not of-age!"

"Yes, I am!" Ginny argued hotly, stepping forward, unafraid. "I told you — I just *turned* seventeen. A few days ago. When was the list made? It might not be up-to-date..."

"It was magically made *this morning* by the headmaster himself. It has the names of *all of-age students* as of *today*!" he snapped back, glowering

with maniacal glee. "Now, if I remember correctly, Professor Snape, this piece of baggage —" Ron started forward angrily and Harry reluctantly joined with Hermione in pulling him back; "— was already in a spot of trouble for sneaking around in the night with our *Head Boy*." He gave Harry a good hard glare. "I believe this time, for being out-of-bounds *again*, suspension is in order?" he finished, raising one eyebrow and looking very hopeful. Ginny's jaw dropped.

"But I've done nothing wrong! I *am* seventeen!" Ginny shrieked, her voice cracking. "Ask my parents! They'll send my birth certificate..."

"Mr. Filch", Snape said in a low, dangerous voice, "we have *urgent business* with the headmaster and we can take up this issue with him. He has the Registry in his office. Rest assured, if Miss Weasley was not cleared to go to Hogsmeade, her punishment will fit the crime. *However*, we do *not* have any more time to waste upon trivial matters!"

Filch's mouth was as thin as Harry had ever seen it, but he finally stepped back and let the six of them pass. Harry put his arm around Ginny's shoulders as they ascended the marble stairs; she glared over her shoulder at Filch, still quaking with rage.

"Someone must have enchanted my name off the list, as a joke!" she spat. "I can't believe the lengths to which some people will go..."

"If that was Malfoy's doing", Ron growled out, "he has yet another thing to answer for —"

"We don't have time for this!" Harry told them both as they reached the corridor with the gargoyle guarding Dumbledore's office. "Snape's right! We have more important things to worry about."

Ginny ducked her head as Snape gave the password and the wall opened. "Yes, you're right, of course", she whispered, sounding contrite. "I'm sorry, Harry..."

He nodded to her as they stepped onto the rising spiral stairs; when Snape knocked on Dumbledore's office door, they were admitted by a Dumbledore who didn't look the least bit surprised to see them. Harry couldn't contain himself and started speaking immediately.

"We came back because we have to tell you about Malfoy. He's with Voldemort. He was summoned, through his Dark Mark, and he went to Little Hangleton. They're all there! If the Aurors and operatives are going to get him, all they have to do is —"

"Harry." Dumbledore looked over his half-moon spectacles at him, very calm. "Breathe. Did you think for an instant that we do not have spies amongst the Death Eaters? I am aware of the meeting and expect a report afterward. As for anyone going there to apprehend Voldemort and his followers — that has been tried. Unfortunately, Voldemort has made the house unplottable, so it is impossible for anyone to find it who has not specifically been summoned through the Dark Mark. And while we do have operatives who received the Dark Mark to aid in their spying, they are vastly outnumbered by loyal Death Eaters. It would be suicide for them to try to take on Voldemort and his *loyal* followers without significant support. They are more valuable as spies than as corpses."

"W — well", he stammered, "but you should know that Draco Malfoy is there. And he's serving Voldemort willingly."

Dumbledore sighed. "Is there anything else, Harry?"

Hermione's jaw had dropped. "What do you mean, is there anything else? Didn't you hear what Harry said?" she practically squeaked.

Dumbledore nodded placidly. "Yes, I did. As for Mr. Malfoy going to Voldemort when he was summoned... did you really think that I would have allowed a Hogsmeade weekend if I didn't have a rather good idea of where Voldemort and his Death Eaters would be on this day? And did you think that I would allow Mr. Malfoy — but not Miss Kirkner — to go to the village without reason?" He raised an eyebrow; she gaped in surprise again.

"So — so you *planned* for him to go to Voldemort? And gave him a way to do it?" Harry said, incredulous. "Is — is Malfoy spying for you?" Harry's heart leapt into his throat; maybe Draco was doing the right thing after all. But Dumbledore shook his head.

"Alas, Harry, I can only hope. I thought it best to trust to Mr. Malfoy's judgment and allow him to make his own choices. Besides, if he were given a potion or placed under Imperius and questioned about whether he is in league with me... well, by my keeping my distance, he can answer quite truthfully that we are not in cahoots. I have faith in Mr. Malfoy; he has shown before an ability to think independently and to do the right thing. His father would not have gone to Azkaban otherwise. I have operatives to report today's events to me concerning Mr. Malfoy. As you and he are not on the best of terms at the moment, I think you should leave this to me", he said with finality.

It was Harry's turn to be indignant. "But — but my scar was hurting and I saw him! He was telling Voldemort that it was all my fault. The dragons, and the dementors. I tell you, he can't be trusted!" He couldn't believe that Dumbledore was just sitting there, calmly telling Harry to get his nose out of something that concerned him to this degree.

Dumbledore, to his surprise, nodded. "You may be right, Harry, you may yet be right. But at this point I need to give him the benefit of the doubt. I knew you were quite safe in Hogsmeade, with the Death Eaters off at their meeting in Little Hangleton, and with Professor Snape nearby. It's not as though I am not concerned with your safety —"

"It's not my bloody safety I'm worried about!" Harry said weakly, unable to understand how Dumbledore could be so calm. "It's — *Malfoy is a Death Eater. A willing* Death Eater. When he leaves that meeting and returns to the castle from Hogsmeade, are you telling me you're going to let him walk around here freely like nothing is *wrong*?"

Dumbledore stood. He looked very stern now. "I have already said that this is under control, Harry. If you do not trust me —"

Harry closed his eyes, shaking his head. "Of course I trust you! It's just that —"

"Then *trust* me", Dumbledore said quietly, his blue eyes looked very hard, not twinkling at Harry at all. Harry had never felt more frustrated in his life.

"I beg your pardon, headmaster", Snape said suddenly, waving his hands at Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione. "I did not mean to question your judgment by bringing them here —"

Dumbledore gave him a small smile. "Quite all right, Severus. I understand entirely. However, I do have some letters to write, so if you will all excuse me —"

"But what about my birthday?" Ginny said, stepping forward.

Dumbledore gave her a kind but perplexed look. "Pardon me, Miss Weasley?" Ginny explained to him what had occurred when they'd returned to the castle, and Dumbledore frowned, looking quite mystified at this. "Now, that is very odd, very odd indeed. You weren't on the list, you say?" Ginny nodded vigorously. He crossed the room to a tall bookcase full of enormous leather-bound books, the shelves reaching up into the dark recesses of the tower.

"*Accio Registry!*" he said calmly, holding his hand above his head. A very large black book appeared to be hurtling down from one of the upper shelves, and Harry was certain it would strike the headmaster on the top of his skull and kill him. However, it flew neatly into his gnarled, outstretched hand, and he carried it to his desk, laying it across the parchments already there. On its cover it bore a large Hogwarts crest, the gold looking like *real* gold, the silver on the Slytherin crest like actual silver. The black leather was ancient and cracked, dark tan scars all up and down the spine. Dumbledore opened it to the middle of the book and a cloud of fine dust arose from the vellum pages, causing them all to begin coughing convulsively. Dumbledore waved the dust away with only minor irritation evident on his face, clearing his throat as he did so.

"So sorry. We had a small spate of babies in January and February, but no new magical children since then. I expect we'll have some in a week or two, however. The longest stretch I can ever remember whilst I've been headmaster was from March to September of nineteen-seventy-five. Voldemort's influence, no doubt. And of course, only the last pages of the Registry are dust-free, though I do try to air it out from time to time..."

"What is that, Professor?" Hermione asked, her hand over her mouth and her eyes squinting against the dust that still permeated the air.

He smiled at her. "It is the Registry, Miss Granger, in which a magical quill wrote your name — as soon as you had one — on the day you were born. It is the Registry wherein all magical children's names appear, if they are born anywhere in the British Isles, whether into Muggle families or wizarding ones. When each of you was named by your parents, the quill wrote that name in the pages of this book, and it is to this book that I go every year to cast the spell to send Hogwarts letters to our new first years." He turned over most of the pages now, leaving only about twenty pages at the end. More dust rose into the air, but they had all covered their mouths by now and were holding their eyes very nearly closed against the pervasive dust. "And", he went on, "it was to this book that I went this morning to cast a spell creating a list for Mr. Filch of all current students who are of-age. Let us go to the year nineteen-eighty-one, to determine what might have gone wrong with my spell. I am sorry if I caused you any inconvenience, Miss Weasley. I have never had a problem with this spell before, when helping Professor McGonagall prepare the Hogwarts letters..."

"I — I'm not saying it was you, Professor", she said quietly. "I reckoned — someone else charmed my name off the parchment. As a bad joke..."

Dumbledore nodded as he turned a page. "Yes, there are some who would find that amusing. That could very well be what occurred, but first we must eliminate —" He ran his finger along some writing on the yellowed page and stopped, peering through his spectacles, then over them. "Hm. Well. Mystery solved. That was easy enough." He looked up and smiled.

Ginny could barely contain herself. "What? What happened?"

"Mr. Filch was correct", Dumbledore said quite pleasantly. "However, in that you were under the impression that your birthday had already —"

"*What?*" Ginny cried. Hermione echoed her a minute later, and Ron and Harry also began talking at the same time. Dumbledore tried to calm them with his hands, but it was some minutes before the room was quiet again.

He finally turned to Ginny and said simply, "I am afraid, Miss Weasley, that you are not yet seventeen years old."

"But — but I —" Ginny was at a loss for words.

"You can look right here, if you like. You are still the first person in your year to be born in April, as you can see. But according to the Registry, the date is the seventh, not — when did you say you thought it was?"

"April first", she whispered, staring at the book.

"Ah", he said, nodding wisely. "No doubt the twins took great advantage of that at times?" he suggested, a lopsided smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. Ron guffawed.

"At times! The twins *loved* that she had that birthday!" he said; then his face fell. "But how could we all have thought her birthday was the first when it's — when?"

"The seventh", Harry said slowly, looking at the yellowed page where a magical quill had written, not quite seventeen years earlier, *Virginia Annabel Weasley*.

Dumbledore peered at Ron; he seemed quite stern. "Are you saying that your own mother was under the impression that the birthday was on the first, not the seventh?"

Ron started to nod, then said, "Well, unless she was just — just making it up. But why would she do that?"

"The Prophecy!" Hermione said suddenly. They all turned to stare at her. She pointed at Maggie, who turned white. "The Prophecy Trelawney gave! Bill went to that Centaur, who told him the Daughter of War would be in his family. He thought that meant the sisters he already had, and so did Pettigrew. That's why he was supposed to kill them. I mean — you and your sister, Maggie", she said to Ginny's older sister now, who was starting to return to her natural color. "And for a while I thought it was Annie — Nita, that is", she corrected herself. "But — if Ginny's birthday is the seventh — that makes her a *three*! And even without that — her name is *also* a three. I worked it out after we got back from Stonehenge. Until then, I never knew Ginny's middle name!"

"A *three*?" Ginny squeaked. "What?"

"Arithmancy! Your birth number! The fourth month added to the seventh day makes eleven. Add that to nine and one, the first two numbers in the year you were born — ten, in other words — and you get twenty-one. Add to that the last two numbers in the year you were born — eight and one — and you get thirty. Add the three and the naught in thirty and you get — three. Your birth number."

Ginny swallowed, then looked at Harry for reassurance. He put his arm around her. "I'm the Daughter of War?" she whispered. "But — but I thought — because of my birthday —"

"But that wasn't your real birthday!" Hermione said, still very excited. "Oh — don't you see what this means? *He can be defeated*! We know everyone who's in the Triangle! Harry's the Lion, Ginny's the Daughter of War —"

"And Draco Malfoy is the Moon Child", Harry said bitterly. "Yeah, he'll probably be extremely cooperative about bringing down his favorite person right now and helping his *least* favorite person — me — to do it." He avoided Dumbledore's eye; he didn't feel like another lecture on the need to give Malfoy the benefit of the doubt.

"So — why did someone want everyone in our family to believe I had a different birthday?"

"Probably to protect you —" Hermione began. To Harry's surprise, Snape chimed in now.

"Pettigrew", he said simply. They all turned to stare at him. He'd been gazing at the Registry; now he lifted his dark eyes and said, "On the night that — that your parents were killed", he said to Harry, "I learned from Crouch that the Secret Keeper, the one who had betrayed them, also knew the identity of the Daughter of War. I thought he meant Sirius Black..." He looked at Maggie and she grasped his hand, her eyes looking moist. Suddenly Harry had a very vivid memory of what he'd seen in Snape's Pensieve, Barty Crouch, Jr. laughing and telling Snape that they'd come to Godric's Hollow to see 'the show'.

"And after Sirius went to Azkaban, you probably reckoned that she was safe, whoever she was", Harry added. Snape nodded. "So — are you saying that he's the one who changed Ginny's birthday? Wormtail? And that it was to protect her?"

"I think that may very well be the case, Harry", Dumbledore said quietly, nodding at him.

Harry tightened his hold on Ginny while she continued to stare at the Registry page with her name on it. When she was only a baby, seven months before Harry was orphaned, Peter Pettigrew had tried to protect Ginny. Had he been afraid he would be ordered to kill another Weasley girl? Was he worried that he'd have to kidnap her and make her disappear, like her older sisters?

Only one person knew the answer to that — and he was Voldemort's prisoner.

* * *

Harry was waiting for Draco Malfoy in the entrance hall when he returned to the castle that day, but before he could say anything, Snape had come striding up the dungeon stairs, saying to Malfoy irritably, "It's about time you got back. While you were gone, Zabini got into an argument with a third year and hexed him. Bulstrode tried to discipline Zabini, and now *she's* in the hospital wing. Zabini is now in my classroom scrubbing stains off the tables and floors using Muggle methods, watched over by Mr. Filch. I can't spend all day babysitting in the common room. Get down there and make certain no more arguments escalate into full-scale attacks. If you need to so much as go to the loo, make one of the sixth- or fifth-year prefects take over. Understand?"

"Even if it's Mariah?"

Snape looked like he wanted to hex the smirk off his face. "Use your *judgment*, Malfoy", he responded, as though he doubted that Malfoy had any. "What do *you* think?" His lip curled in a sneer and Harry fought the urge to cheer, clenching his jaw almost painfully to prevent himself from making a noise.

Draco Malfoy looked levelly at his head-of-house. "Yes, sir", he said laconically, not sounding disrespectful, exactly, but certainly not as respectful as he had been of Snape in the past. His eyes slid over Harry for a split second before he preceded Snape down toward the dungeons; before he left, Snape glared at Harry and gestured toward the marble stairs. He was dismissing him. *Telling me to bugger off, basically*, Harry thought discontentedly, as he dragged himself up the stairs, away from Draco Malfoy.

Ginny, to Filch's great disappointment, did not get suspended. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Bill brought her birth certificate to the school and it was plain to see that the '1' on it had previously had a small, faint cross-piece on the top, when it had been a seven. Ginny's parents were quite shocked that they had been tricked all those years ago.

However, Bill told Dumbledore and Harry — and his parents and Ginny, for the first time — that he'd thought it very peculiar that his mother had written to him and Charlie about Ginny's birth a full six days after it had taken place. He still had another old letter, dated the fourth of April, in which his mother had said that the baby wasn't born yet. Bill had never asked his mother about this, as the thought had also occurred to him that they might be protecting Ginny, because of the Prophecy. Over the years, Bill had forgotten that he'd ever wondered about the reason for the discrepancies in the letters; he'd left home to work for Gringotts in Egypt just after finishing Hogwarts, and until the Quidditch World Cup, he'd seldom come back to the Burrow except for Christmas holidays. He was never around when it was Ginny's birthday, and in any case didn't think of it as having a precise date; he had usually sent presents from Egypt for Ginny, the twins and Ron all in one package. He confessed that he didn't even remember Ron's precise birthday, smiling sheepishly at his mother. She promised that she wouldn't tell Ron.

* * *

It was very strange to Harry that life basically returned to normal the following week. There were so many new things in his head which had to

be pushed aside in favor of prefects' meetings, Quidditch practice (the final was the first Saturday after the Easter holiday), N.E.W.T. revision and Dueling Club meetings. He hadn't had the nerve to call for an Elven Army training session since Dobby had died, but Ron and Hermione told him that he needed to do this, for himself as much as for the elves, and he reluctantly agreed. He promoted one of the other elves to Dobby's former rank, trying to maintain his composure as the small figure saluted him and then started taking the troops through their paces. He'd wanted to cry on Ginny afterward, but the tears wouldn't come, and instead she'd simply cradled his head in her lap by the shore of the lake.

Spring was in full force as the holiday approached, and it felt strange to Harry that he was going to be returning to Ascog again already, having just been there for his suspension. But to his surprise, he learned that he was to spend his holiday in Hogsmeade; Sirius' sister Ursula, her husband and the three children were going to the Isle of Wight with Sirius' parents, and only Cassiopeia and her husband, Floyd, would be staying at Ascog Castle. Sirius himself would be flitting about Britain on business for Dumbledore.

"Unless you *want* the company of just my charming oldest sister and her husband for a week..." he started to say to Harry as they walked down the stairs toward the Great Hall for breakfast; he affected an expression of extreme innocence. Harry was aghast.

"Er, no, I'll take Hog's End, thanks. You're sure I'm invited?"

"By Percy himself, and considering what your relationship used to be with his *wife* I think that's a pretty clear sign of welcome, don't you?"

Harry grinned and nodded. It would be good to see Katie again, and it probably wouldn't be too difficult to get Ron and Ginny to visit from the Burrow. Hermione would be staying with her parents, so they wouldn't get to see her during the holiday, but you couldn't have everything. And the twins were always good for a laugh. It promised to be a fun holiday. Maybe he'd be able to get his mind off some things that had been plaguing his nightmares, such as the sight of the people who'd been burnt by the dragons, or the sight of Draco Malfoy stepping up to Voldemort and saying smugly, *Harry Potter...*

But some of his expectations turned out to be quite wrong. Ron, Ginny and Hermione were also staying at Hog's End. Ron would be sharing the room that had been Harry's in his other life, and Ginny and Hermione

would be sharing what he thought of as Jamie's room. However, the fact that Hermione was around for the holiday meant that Harry had to think about something that *hadn't* been plaguing his nightmares at all, although he certainly had the impression that Hermione thought it should have been.

N.E.W.T.s were almost upon them.

Hermione felt that the holiday would provide an excellent opportunity to revise and to get in some Transfiguration, Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts practice in the garden at Hog's End. Harry hadn't been thinking about N.E.W.T.s *at all*; he'd made only a half-hearted attempt to keep up with his reading while he was suspended. And Hermione bringing up N.E.W.T.s caused Ron to spiral downward into depression again.

"Bloody hell, Hermione, do you think anyone in their right mind is going to give me a job when I finish school anyway?" They were eating breakfast at the Gryffindor table on the Saturday that marked the start of the holiday; after they were done eating they were to get one of the carriages to the village. "What do I need a single N.E.W.T. for? Y'think that'll make any difference? Everyone knows I'm a werewolf. That's like getting *negative* N.E.W.T.s. You think Lupin didn't do well on his tests in seventh year? You think Dumbledore would have hired him if he'd failed everything? But it didn't do any good, did it? You see anyone else queuing up to hire him?" He toyed with some eggs with his fork, viciously stabbing a clot of yellow and white and stuffing it into his mouth.

"Ron, that's ridiculous! Why are you being so defeatist? Are you telling me that after making that speech during the Order of Merlin ceremony —"

Ron frowned. "Yeah, well, there's something I haven't told, er, anyone..." he said softly, furtively, looking around at the rest of his housemates, chattering excitedly to their friends about their plans for the holiday.

"What?" Hermione snapped. "That you have mood swings? Sorry, Ron, but that was true *before* you became a werewolf", she acidly, pouring herself some orange juice.

Harry bristled at her tone. "*That's* friendly", he said, deciding it was better to criticize her himself before Ron did and the two of them had a row.

"Sorry", she mumbled, reddening. "I just meant that —"

"Listen, there are a load of werewolf-haters out there", Ron said in a whisper, leaning over his food to speak to them. "Since I got the O.M., I've — I've been getting these letters — they make the ones you got with the bubotuber pus look like love notes..."

"What?" Hermione practically shrieked; Ron looked like he wanted to put a permanent silencing charm on her.

"*Will you shut up?*" he whispered fiercely to her. "I'm only saying —"

"Were they anonymous or do you know who wrote them?" she asked quickly, whispering.

"Some of each", he said, sighing and eating more eggs. "Listen, it doesn't matter", he said as he chewed. He swallowed and said, "I let Nita — and you — get me all worked up about werewolf rights and such when I made that speech. Don't know what I was thinking. Things are never going to change", he said morosely, staring at his empty plate.

Hermione put her hand on his arm sympathetically. But she was still on her N.E.W.T. kick. "Then you can *make* them change by performing *brilliantly* on your N.E.W.T.s!" she said jubilantly. "Think of it. It'll be like thumbing your nose at all of those ignorant people. Or anyone else who's ever been biased against werewolves."

"You mean like *me*? I didn't used to be the most enlightened person in the world about this, remember. What am I supposed to do to get people to understand — bite them all and turn *them* into werewolves too?" he grumbled.

Hermione shook her head. "Of course not", she responded, as though Ron had been serious; he glanced at Harry and rolled his eyes. But Harry was starting to see her point.

"Ron — remember how I felt about showing Snape I really could do Potions? How I put in all that extra work to do it? Well — think of it that way. And anyway, we'll all be together for the holiday. We can suffer together", he laughed, punching Ron on the arm lightly. Ron laughed for a moment, finally smiling at Harry.

"Yeah, I reckon. Misery loves company, after all", he said darkly. He playfully punched Harry back, but he evidently wasn't thinking about keeping himself under control and Harry fell hard against Neville, who promptly ended up with the left half of his face in his porridge. Harry tried to extricate himself from Neville's arms and apologize profusely, but from Neville's other side Parvati Patil had arisen and was now closing on Ron.

"Ron Weasley! What do you think you are doing? Using Harry to attack Neville is hardly constructive if you're feeling jealous!"

Ron looked at her with his mouth open, clearly utterly baffled. "Pardon?" he managed to say weakly after a moment's silence.

Neville was still wiping the porridge from his face as she pulled him to his feet. "Are you claiming that you didn't know we've been a couple since Valentine's?" she demanded of Ron, glaring at him.

Neville was more than a little disheveled, porridge staining the front of his robes. He finally straightened up and pulled out his wand; Ron actually cringed, not knowing what he was up to, but Neville was calmly cleaning the rest of the porridge off his robes. He looked quite pleased with himself, putting his arm around Parvati afterward. "I used to think you were a bit clever, Ron, but now I'm not so sure", Neville said smugly, although it sounded false; Harry knew that Neville looked up to Ron. Neville grinned at his girlfriend, who gazed up at him with satisfaction on her face. "Parvati is coming to visit me, Gran, Uncle Algie and Aunt Enid during the holiday. We have to go now. Bye!" he said cheerfully, as he and Parvati left for the entrance hall. Ron was still staring at them in amazement. Hermione reached out with her hand and closed his mouth with a snap.

"If you really didn't know about them, I can hardly accuse you of paying too much attention to your ex-girlfriend, but *honestly*, Ron! If you're that attentive about your N.E.W.T. revision, you *will* get a negative number", she sniffed, returning to her food.

"Hang on, what just happened here? If I'm up on what's going on with the pair of them I'm paying too much attention to Parvati, but since I'm clueless, I'm an idiot?" He shook his head, putting his arm around Hermione's shoulders. "Is it my fault that I have such a brilliant, beautiful girlfriend that I'm distracted from noticing anything else in the world — other people, homework, revision..." He gave her a sly smile and she laughed.

"You're good with the blarney, at any rate. Too bad there's no N.E.W.T. for *that*."

"That's where you'd be wrong", Ron said breezily, stealing a piece of bacon from Harry's plate. "Harry and I call it `Divination'."

All three of them laughed, and across the table where she'd been talking to Ruth Pelta, Ginny smiled at them. Harry was glad to see that Ron had come out of his depression fairly quickly. But suddenly, Ginny's

cheerful expression changed to one of apprehension; she seemed to be looking past Harry across the vast hall. He turned to see Draco Malfoy glaring at him; Malfoy looked away first, turning to Goyle to say something with a snide curl of his lip. Harry still did not turn away and Malfoy met his eyes again briefly before striding out of the hall, Mariah, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott and Zabini in his wake.

Ever since the day in Hogsmeade, Mariah had been feeling remarkably well again, and Draco Malfoy had made a great show of walking with her everywhere, their arms about each other as though they'd been surgically attached. His former cohorts, plus Nott and Zabini, were also much in evidence. Mariah no longer seemed interested in being Ginny's friend, and indeed, snubbed repeated overtures Ginny made to her. Ginny had been rather hurt by this, but Harry had reminded her that Mariah's first loyalty was to Draco Malfoy; if Malfoy had told Mariah she could no longer be Ginny's friend, that was that.

There was a crackling in the air, a palpable tension whenever Draco Malfoy walked into the same room as Harry, who felt like he was waiting for something to happen, but he didn't know what. Oddly, Malfoy kept his distance, sneering at Harry from afar, as he and his clique cut a wide swath through the corridors, laughing whenever anyone complained about being bumped or jostled. And yet Malfoy did not retaliate with magic; in general, apart from his attitude, his behavior was beyond reproach. Harry would have loved to find a reason to at least give him detention, but Malfoy did not present him with any opportunities. Would that change once he was no longer in the castle? Harry wondered. When the cat was away, would the dragon play?

Harry had no doubt that *he'd* be safe at Hog's End for the holiday — along with everyone else who lived there — but would Hogwarts be safe *from* Draco Malfoy?

* * *

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny walked down the stairs to the Hog's End drawing room, where George, Angelina and little Rufus and Rowena were waiting for them. Percy and Katie were working, and Fred and Lee were off on company business. While they'd been unpacking, Ron had challenged Harry to a game of wizarding chess, and Ginny wanted to hear Hermione play a new cello piece that she'd written. They were all gabbling in a friendly mishmash of a conversation when the front door suddenly

opened to reveal Nita Anderssen, looking quite nervous. They stopped talking abruptly and Ron and Ginny went to their sister, as she was clearly distressed.

"I'm sorry to barge in; P-percy gave me the password", she stuttered nervously. "I came to see Harry." Her siblings turned to him in surprise. He frowned and finished descending the stairs, Hermione behind him, lugging her cello. Before he could say anything, Nita said, "You need to come with me. To St. Mungo's. Your aunt has been asking for you. And — someone else I think you should see first."

He was shocked. "Aunt Petunia is finally talking? Thank god! But — who else?"

Her mouth went very thin. "Rodney Jeffries. In a way —"

Ginny, Ron and Hermione gawped, and he felt no less surprised. "Erm — are you sure it's safe?" he ventured.

"Well — that's a very good question at St. Mungo's, these days. But I contacted your headmaster first and we worked it all out. I've come in an ambulance, so I can smuggle you in. We don't want there to be a record of your visiting. It's *really* not safe at St. Mungo's just now. We'd thought that the Death Eaters who surrendered at Stonehenge might be like the ones who surrendered at Gringotts, that they might turn around and pull a fast one, so we had loads of guards outside their wards. Instead, it turned out that many of them were under Imperius, they weren't *real* Death Eaters at all, and — and —"

Ginny put her arm around her sister's shoulder. "What?"

Nita swallowed, looking very grim, but not crying. "Five so far — all of whom said they'd been under Imperius — have been murdered in their beds by other Death Eater patients, although pinning down just which ones is proving very difficult. And on top of that, my senior *refused* to believe it was other patients — whose injuries were self-inflicted, it turned out, so they could be near the others. One of them nearly got *me* when I came to do my rounds." She pulled up her sleeve, revealing a long scar on her right forearm which seemed to be in the process of healing still. She looked a little smug. "Idiot! He didn't expect to get a doctor who'd been to Durmstrang... I've seen it all..."

Hermione and Ginny were horrified; Ron appeared justifiably proud. Nita looked at Harry seriously. "Disguise yourself again, to play it safe. And only you can come; I can't be conducting a crowd around the

corridors — it would be too conspicuous. I'll put you on a stretcher and levitate you. As you'll be arriving in an ambulance, that will be best. The driver doesn't even suspect that we're not here for a genuine patient, so I'll actually be levitating you out of the house, if you don't mind. And even if you do", she added.

Harry shook his head. "No, no. That's all right, I don't mind. Security is that bad at St. Mungo's right now?"

Nita sighed. "That's not all that's very bad, but I don't really have time to get into details. Come on — we need to hurry."

"Why? What's the rush?" Ron wanted to know.

"If I had time to say, we wouldn't need to hurry!" she said irritably. "Harry can fill you in when he gets back. But right now —"

"That's fine", Harry said quickly, understanding that sometimes explanations took too much time. He closed his eyes and concentrated on growing out his hair and beard. When he opened them, he saw Nita looking at him in shock.

"Well! That's convenient, isn't it? I didn't realize that was how you'd done it... Well, it doesn't really matter, I reckon." She waved her wand and produced a simple stretcher, floating in mid-air in the entrance hall. Harry sat on the edge tentatively, then laid down fully on it, his body very rigid, feeling invisible bonds pressing down on him. She waved her wand again and a sheet appeared, covering him up to the neck. Ron opened the front door and she guided the stretcher to the ambulance in the drive; the doors flew open and Harry floated inside. He felt the stretcher attach itself to the floor immediately.

"I'll be riding up front", Nita told him as she closed the doors. "We'll be there in a blink." With the doors closed, the back of the ambulance was dim but not pitch dark; some light bled through the partition separating him from Nita and the driver. He heard her get into her seat and close the door, and then the magical motor started up, making the vehicle vibrate violently. They left the house's drive and turned onto the cobbled street, and a moment later Harry felt a terrific jolt accompanied by a loud *bang!* He realized that his heart was beating very fast and he wondered just what kind of viper's nest he was about to enter. It seemed that St. Mungo's was a very dangerous place these days.

He closed his eyes when the ambulance doors were opened and kept them closed while Nita levitated his stretcher into St. Mungo's. He felt her

hand on his brow briefly, and he realized she was smoothing his hair over his scar. He didn't dare open his eyes, but it didn't feel like they'd gone far when he heard her speak briefly to someone who seemed to be a guard; a moment later he felt a breeze from a door opening, and the stretcher was moving again. He opened his eyes very slightly, looking at the room through wary slits.

Only one other patient was in the medium-sized room, although it had two beds. Harry dropped his jaw. It wasn't Jeffries at all. He tried to sit, but was still strapped down.

"Oh, sorry", Nita said quickly, removing the binding spell. Harry was up in a trice, walking over to the bed and staring at the man lying there, who slowly opened his eyes.

"Hello, Harry", he said softly. Apparently, Harry's disguise did not fool him; he put his hand up to his forehead and realized that his hair had fallen away from where it had hidden his scar. Harry turned to Nita.

"Are you sure this is Jeffries? Why does he look like this?"

She crossed her arms, a look of disapproval on her face. "He'd been using someone else's appearance. The potion wore off after we brought him in." She glanced at the door. "I'll be in the corridor, to make sure no one else comes in. I'm not so sure about some of these guards..."

"Thanks", Harry said to her, nodding. She nodded back, reminding him again of a female Percy, the light glinting off her spectacles. After she had gone, Harry turned back to the man before him. He looked up at Harry with anguished eyes, a tear starting to trickle from one eye. "It's gone, Harry. All gone..."

"What's gone?" Harry whispered.

"*My magic.*"

Harry pulled up a chair and sat by the bed. "You mean — you can't heal people anymore? Are you certain?" He thought of the people he'd seen Jeffries help. "Maybe you just, erm, need to believe that —"

He shook his head. "The — the dementor. It put its mouth on mine..." He shuddered. "It wasn't long enough for it to get my soul, but it was long enough to —" He couldn't finish; he looked green, perhaps from remembering the dementor.

"You're quite sure? You're a Squib again, like before the Westminster attack?" He nodded. Harry shook his head in wonder. "I don't understand

how you ever went to Hogwarts if you were a Squib, even though you *did* get expelled because of it..."

He sat up a little, frowning and curious. "How do you know that? Did Bill tell you?"

Harry was confused. "Bill? You mean Bill Weasley? No, it was the Grey Lady who told me. The Ravenclaw ghost at Hogwarts. Bill Weasley?" he said again, perplexed.

"Bill was one of my best friends at school", he sighed. "And Alex Wood and Jack Richards. Bill and Alex were in Gryffindor; Jack was in Hufflepuff with me, but he and Bill had been good friends when they were younger, before Hogwarts."

"I met Alex Wood!" Harry said, remembering Bill introducing him at the stadium in Wales. "At a Quidditch game. He came with Bill."

He nodded. "Bill was always a very loyal friend. *He* could have been a Hufflepuff. Did you tell him about me? Should I thank him for you not telling everyone else who I am? I was hoping that after I healed you, you would decide to protect my secret, but I wasn't completely certain that you would..."

"What?" Harry was baffled. "Bill and I never — your name didn't — *what?*" he said again.

He gave a rueful laugh. "I think we're talking at cross-purposes, Harry. Didn't you realize that I was Rodney Jeffries at the wedding, in August? Wasn't that why you were so upset to see me there?"

Harry shook his head, remembering his shock in walking into the Spinnets' drawing room and hearing the familiar voice singing Gilbert and Sullivan. "No! I thought you were Roger's cousin!"

"I *am* Roger's cousin. And that alone upset you to that degree?"

"No, not that alone. In my other —" Harry stopped and looked toward the door, which remained shut. He'd been about to tell about changing time, and he wasn't so sure he should. He turned back to the bed. "Erm, I know someone, see, who — who changed time. It's been changed back, but when they changed it, Voldemort never fell. You know, back when I was a baby. And I was never 'The Boy Who Lived'. Another world was created because of that." He swallowed, thinking again of the people left behind in that world, of Jamie and his brothers, of the Draco Malfoy who'd been his friend. But thinking of Malfoy made him shake himself back to reality — the real Malfoy was *here*, in this world, and he was *not* Harry's friend.

"And you — *you* were in Azkaban in that world. But ghosts, see — they remember both worlds. Some ghosts at Hogwarts told me more about this other world. It was awful, but not just because of Volde — because of You-Know-Who. The Ministry's reactions were so dreadful... Muggle-borns were banned from going to Hogwarts, to 'protect' them. All of the werewolves the Ministry could find were rounded up and put in detention camps, so they couldn't join You-Know-Who. The Squibs were put in camps, too, but that was supposedly to protect *them*, like with the Muggle-born students. That included you, I reckon. The Squib camps. But you — you didn't stay there. You went to Azkaban for some reason. I don't know why. You were in solitary confinement, too. And yet — you were a Squib. I don't think you ever became magical in that world, but then, I could be wrong..."

He sat up even straighter now, his eyes wild. "What?"

"Yeah, I know. It's really weird..."

"No", he said, his breathing erratic. "It's — I've *dreamed* about that — being in a camp —"

"What do you mean you *dreamed* about it?" Harry demanded.

"What do you think it means? I thought — I thought — I don't know what I thought", he said helplessly. He closed his eyes, then opened them and tried to start again. "In my dreams, I was taken to a camp with other Squibs, by Aurors. It was awful; they claimed it was to protect us, just like you said. Whenever I awoke from one of these dreams — I didn't realize it was actually another life that I'd lived. I thought it was just a kind of — warning. That's why I was glad not to be a Squib anymore, and why I was trying to help people find the magic in themselves. The first time I had the dream, I thought, in a way, being a Squib is sort of like being in prison, watching all of the magical people walking around, free to do whatever they want... It never occurred to me to interpret the dream *literally*. And I thought that when I truly succeeded, when I had helped as many people as possible tap into their own source of power, of magic, the dreams would stop. No one else would feel shackled, the way I did when I was a Squib. But instead, it seemed the more I worked toward my goal, the more I had the dreams." His eyes had a distant look.

"I began to keep a dream journal. In the dreams, I was the ring-leader of a group trying to escape from the Squib camp. I was the only one who'd been to Hogwarts, so I knew the most about magic. The rest knew some,

because of having one magical parent, like me, but some had two. Many had magical siblings as well. Still — I knew the most. I'd actually had five years of Potions, which was necessary for us to brew a sleeping draught to knock out the guards, so we could escape. Getting ingredients was devilishly difficult, not to mention a way to brew the potion. We had small coal-burning stoves in our barracks, for heat, and they also let us make our own tea. We had to use a teapot to work on the sleeping draught. Our barracks had the *smelliest* tea in the camp", he said softly, smiling at the memory. "I'd also seen the most wands, so I was able to give advice to the people whose job it was to make fake ones, on the sly — we had to swap the guards' real wands for phonies, as a back-up plan, in case the Potion didn't work...

"I had these dreams over months and months; I wrote them all down, trying to work out what they meant. I thought that my biggest problem was working out what it meant that one of my closest friends in the camp turned me in to the authorities." He shook his head. "He just — betrayed me. To get a reward. The next thing I knew, in my dream, I was being carted off to Azkaban. They put me in solitary because they didn't want me telling others about the Squib camps, which were supposed to be a secret."

Harry was shocked; he had no idea that people, *ordinary people* in this life might possess buried memories of the other world he'd created. It made sense, though; if ghosts knew, those memories had to be somewhere in the minds of the people before they died. It simply seemed that, for most people, the memories were too deeply buried to be easily accessed before death made it all clear, so they came out in dreams, which the dreamers naturally disregarded as nonsense, or — in this case — regarded as omens.

"So *that's* why you were in Azkaban", Harry breathed, relieved to finally know. "And in solitary. You sang Gilbert and Sullivan incessantly, because you hated it, and the dementors had sucked all of your happy thoughts from you. You wouldn't answer me until I called you 'Buttercup'. You sang that damn song *constantly*. And then, at the Spinnets', when I walked into the room you were singing *that* song and I recognized your voice right away..."

His eyes widened. "*You!* You were in my dream! I couldn't see you very well though... I certainly don't remember you having a scar."

"I only have the scar because of You-Know-Who trying and failing to kill me. That didn't happen in that world", Harry reminded him.

"You said your name was Harry. *You* were in Azkaban too!"

Harry realized he'd slipped up; he grimaced. "Right. It — it was actually my mistake that created the new timeline", he admitted. "I had to escape from prison to put it right."

"Yes, I dreamt about the alarm being raised, after you escaped", he said, nodding. "I remember thinking, when I was writing about the dream the next morning, in my journal, *there's* someone who wasn't letting himself be held prisoner, who took control and went out to meet his destiny. And I decided that I wanted to be like that; I wanted to break out of my prison, to stop feeling *trapped*. I — I didn't know it was *you*." He laughed. "I didn't know I was making Harry Potter my role model!"

"Well, *that's* why I — I reacted the way I did when I arrived at the Spinnetts' for the wedding! I knew you'd gone to prison in my — erm, in that other world. Which meant to me that you were potentially a criminal in *this* world."

"And so you didn't trust me." A cloud moved over his face "I understand now. And here I thought you recognized me as Rodney Jeffries, even though this wasn't the face you'd seen when we met in Surrey", he said, pointing to himself.

"So — what should I call you?" Harry wanted to know.

"You can call me Geoff. My last name is actually Rottenham."

"Your mum didn't change her name?" The letters from Alicia had said his mother's name was Bronwen Davies.

"Mum and Dad never married." He shrugged. "It was never important enough to them; they would have had to get fake papers for my mum, since as far as Muggles knew, she didn't exist. I know people in mixed marriages do it all the time, but they didn't want the bother. We never stayed in one place long enough for it to matter, anyway."

"Because of your dad being an itinerant actor", Harry prompted. Geoff nodded.

"Moving around made it easier to hide that my mum was a witch. Plus, she was often on the careless side, and we frequently had to dash from a village just after she'd been a bit, erm, imprudent about her magic. I reckon the Ministry cleaned up after us, but I don't really know. They

never managed to catch up to my mum, or work out that it was her causing the problems. Since she didn't have a permanent residence."

"And then they assume, if they *do* know where you live, that just because *someone's* done magic at your house, that it had to be the resident wizard", Harry mumbled, thinking of the letter he'd received from the Ministry after his first year.

"Well, I wouldn't know about that", Geoff said, shrugging. Harry was still baffled about a lot of things.

"How did you get through five years of Hogwarts? How did you even get Sorted?"

"It's true that I wasn't on the list of students to be Sorted", he said, nodding. "I still didn't know at that point what my mother had done, giving me her old letter with just the first name changed. She meant well, she really did. They let me put on the Sorting Hat, but it told me I didn't belong there. I thought — I thought I would die. So Dumbledore had a talk with it — what was said, I don't know — and he had me put it back on. It didn't really say anything else to me; just put me in Hufflepuff."

Harry was amazed. "So — Dumbledore knew you were a Squib, and you hadn't received a letter, and he let you stay? How did you get the work done when —?"

He shrugged. "It's not as hard as you might think. Year after year, I did fine on my written exams and assignments, and my work in Astronomy, Herbology, and History of Magic was all tops. I didn't even do badly in Divination — plenty of students don't have the Sight and don't get poor marks as long as they make up their star charts and memorize what all of those shapes you see in the tea leaves mean... I did well in Muggle Studies, too, obviously. Even Potions didn't pose much of a problem. Oh, I worked hard. The only classes that I didn't do well in were Charms, Transfiguration, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. One-third of my classes, and the most important ones. But none of those teachers ever failed me outright — just gave me barely passing marks — so I continued on as a Hogwarts student. It didn't hurt that Bill, Alex and Jack were also helping me fool the teachers. Bill's wandless magic was just *amazing*, and this was before fifth year.

"However, when it came time for my O.W.L.s... I just couldn't perform in the practical tests for those three subjects. And while that didn't cause me to fail when I was younger, it did hurt me on the O.W.L.s. The practical

tests are very important, as you know. I received two for Potions, and one each for Astronomy, Herbology, History of Magic, Divination, and Muggles Studies. Now, normally, seven's not bad. But you're not *allowed* to not get a single O.W.L. for Charms, Transfiguration and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Did you know that? Probably not. It very likely hasn't come up as an issue with anyone you know because most people *will* get at least one of those. However, I didn't get a single one, and Dumbledore had no choice but to tell me that I couldn't stay on." He sighed. "He was really very nice about it, and didn't punish Bill, Alex and Jack for helping me cheat all of those years. Dumbledore actually asked *me* for forgiveness; he called letting me stay at the school a 'little experiment'. He offered me a job, too, so I could stay at the castle if I liked. But I couldn't bear the thought of seeing my friends go on with their last two years of school while I shoveled manure in the greenhouses or followed Hagrid around the grounds. I thanked him, but declined.

"Of course, after I left Hogwarts, I discovered that I wasn't qualified to sit for the exams that Muggles take when they're around sixteen. I hadn't had a proper Muggle education."

"But — what did you do, then?"

Jeffries — Harry realized he was starting to think of him as Jeffries, not as Geoff, Roger's cousin — looked a bit dodgy. "My mum paid for some papers for me, to let me pass in the Muggle world. We made up the name Rodney Jeffries and invented a school history for me. I started living in libraries wherever we went, studying all of the subjects Muggle children are learning from the ages of eleven to sixteen, trying to catch up on my education so I could function in the Muggle world. I finally enrolled in a Muggle college, and eventually I was able to take A-Levels. Sometime in there — I think it was a year or two after I left Hogwarts — I was with my mum when she received her *Daily Prophet*, and it was all over the news that You-Know-Who had killed your parents, but you had lived, and his power was somehow broken after he tried to kill you. A couple of years ago when I was visiting Mum and Dad, I happened to see another copy of the *Prophet*, saying you were a champion in the Triwizard Tournament. It had pictures, so I knew it was you the moment I saw you, when you came to see me in Surrey..."

"Yeah, about that", Harry said anxiously, sitting forward. "Those people who worked for you — when it was on the news that they were

missing, I thought you — you'd done something to them." He watched Jeffries closely as he answered. But Jeffries just shrugged.

"They're fine. I put memory charms on the lot of them and sent them on their way. After what happened with your aunt, I started to have second thoughts about what I was doing... The problem was, I was relatively new to performing magic, see, since it happened to me so late, and I certainly didn't learn about memory charms at Hogwarts. I overdid it. Some of them were wandering about for some time before they were found. I didn't realize what I'd done. I was quite surprised to find out they were almost all missing. As far as I know, they've all turned up now. That sort of thing doesn't get huge headlines, does it? Just disappearances." Harry nodded in agreement, but he wondered why Jeffries had second thoughts.

Harry moved his shoulders, feeling his shirt brushing against his back; he remembered what a relief it had been when his burns had been healed. "You — you healed my burns. Much faster than the poultice. Why?"

Jeffries' mouth was very thin. "I was actually here at St. Mungo's that day because Mum and I had come to visit Fleur. Roger had asked us to check on her, and specifically — well, I think he hoped I could help her. I hoped I could, too. I knew she was going to have Roger's child." He ran his hand down his face, looking anguished. "But I couldn't get through to her. She was just — not *here* enough, you know?"

Harry nodded, remembering his visits to Fleur. "I know", he whispered croakily.

"We had signed in as Bronwen Davies and Geoffrey Rottenham, because the parchment is charmed to react if you don't put your true name. Mum explained to them that because I was a Squib, I didn't need to turn in a wand. After I tried and failed to cure Fleur, I felt so frustrated, and then I found out where you were. And I thought, maybe if I healed you, you wouldn't tell anyone about who I was, *and* I could still do *some* good... So I healed you, and others; I worked my way through the wards that day, in fact, until my mum decided it wasn't safe to stay any longer. I found out later that I caused a bit of an uproar amongst the staff." He grinned. "I may be a hardworking and loyal Hufflepuff, but I'm also a bit of an anarchist, I reckon. Must come from being brought up in a caravan and living all over the place."

Harry laughed for a moment. "It's such relief to know that you meant well. I was afraid there were all sorts of ulterior motives, that you were

really — I don't know. My best friend reckoned, as soon as things started going bad at Stonehenge, that you were in league with Volde — I mean, You-Know-Who. I told him that you might not have known about what was going to happen."

His face dropped again and he buried his face in his hands for a moment. When he raised his eyes to Harry once more, he looked more anguished than anyone Harry had ever seen. "It's true, Harry, that I didn't know about the dragons and dementors. *That* was a complete surprise to me. But — but I knew that Death Eaters were going to come. I knew it was a trap. I did that — laid the trap. It was completely deliberate. Your friend was closer to the truth than you were, in a way." He was speaking very softly now. "I started up again, traveling around, having larger and larger meetings, because — because of You-Know-Who. But you have to understand!" he said quickly, when he saw the look of fury blossoming on Harry's face. "It was to protect my family!"

Harry stood and backed up in disgust. "What? Are you actually saying —"

He bowed his head. "Yes, I am. You see — it all started with Roger being recruited by You-Know-Who..."

"I know about that", Harry said quickly, his sympathy for Jeffries having abruptly evaporated. "I know about the way he was supposed to trick Alicia into marrying him —"

"But he couldn't do it!" Jeffries said quickly. "Roger wasn't bad at heart, whatever you think. And he was in love with Fleur. He told Alicia everything, and she — sweet girl! — agreed to help, to assure that our family would be safe."

Harry crossed his arms and surveyed Jeffries from the foot of the bed. "I know all about that, too."

"All about it? Really *all*?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "How do you mean?"

Jeffries looked at the door very nervously; it remained shut, but Harry instinctively turned to look also. "Please, Harry. Listen to everything I have to say. I want someone to *know* all of this, just in case..."

"Just in case *what*? Just in case you pull another disappearing act?"

He shook his head. "No. I told you, I can't do magic anymore. The dementor —" He shuddered and hugged himself tightly, squeezing his eyes

shut. When he opened them, Harry relented a little, returning to his chair by the bedside.

"Why do you say that it all started with Roger being recruited?" he asked, trying to keep his voice level.

"Because Roger had to do what *he* told him to, in order to keep the family safe. And to protect Fleur and the baby. And Alicia and her parents. He had no choice. He told me — there was even a Slytherin boy he'd gone to school with who'd been killed by his own father for refusing to become a Death Eater. All he wanted to do was play Quidditch..."

Harry nodded, remembering. "Yes. Marcus Flint. I never would have credited him with having the sense to *not* be a Death Eater, but he turned out to be all right after all."

"At the expense of his life", Jeffries reminded him. "Roger was terrified of that happening to *us*, his family. We don't have a large family — it's just my mum and her brother, Roger's dad. And my dad and me, and Roger's mum and — well, there used to be Evan, too, of course. Roger was doing everything he could to keep everyone safe and he felt that what happened to Evan was all his fault. That's exactly what he *didn't* want to happen, so he agreed to do everything he was told. But then — he was told to marry Alicia. This was before Evan died. But he was in love with Fleur..."

"I was visiting for Christmas, over a year ago; he was going back and forth on whether to tell Alicia what was really going on. He didn't want to deceive her, nor Fleur. He really didn't, but he was stuck. I wanted to talk to him because of having been changed by the Westminster attack. I wanted some advice. I knew my mum would be biased. I thought — Roger's level-headed. He's a smart bloke, Head Boy and all that. He might have some ideas.

"And he did. He — he came up with the idea of using me to attract a load of followers, Muggles and witches and wizards who were Muggle-lovers. A way to deliver victims to You-Know-Who, although he didn't tell me that right off. He just said that I should do what wizards aren't usually allowed to do — use my power for good. He said that wizards have to worry about the Ministry of Magic, but I wouldn't need to. Of course, he was wrong about that. The Ministry's been dogging my footsteps from the very start. But what I didn't know back then was that he was hoping to beg

off marrying Alicia in exchange for giving You-Know-Who a lot of victims through me."

"Which didn't work", Harry said grimly, now feeling a lot more charitable toward Jeffries than toward Roger Davies.

Jeffries made a face. "Of course it didn't work. First off, I chickened out and tried to disappear, after what happened in Surrey. Plus, Roger didn't get the purpose, at first, of his marrying Alicia."

"The purpose?"

"You know, getting her Muggle father into Parliament, then discrediting him and getting someone else to take his place. To get power in the Muggle government."

"Ah", Harry said, nodding. "Are you sure of that? That Roger didn't know, I mean."

"Well, as I said, he didn't know at first. He found out in time to carry out his orders, of course. That was before Roger took Alicia's father's place, using Polyjuice Potion, shot the majority whip and then pretended to try to kill the bloke who replaced the whip. Had to have someone who was known to have witnessed Mr. Spinnet doing the murder, after all. He was the spitting image of his father-in-law when he was committing the murder, so it was perfect; Spinnet's fingerprints were on the gun, it was clearly him on the security tapes, and the surviving would-be victim could testify to his identity. And Spinnet's only alibi was that he was asleep in his office. Roger had actually stunned him. After it was verified in the press that the bloke Roger had wounded could testify against Spinnet, Roger shunted him to the side, hid him away, and began impersonating him using Polyjuice Potion. He even testified against his own father-in-law at the trial..."

Harry's jaw dropped. "He was Clive — erm — what's the name —?"

"Clive Metford. Yes. The real Mr. Metford was being hidden in his own house, a prisoner. Luckily for Roger, he was a single man, no wife and children for Roger to deal with. Very neat and tidy."

Harry stood and paced, his mind reeling with the new information that when Clive Metford had testified at Mr. Spinnet's trial, it had really been Roger Davies. "That explains it!" he declared. "That's how he *knew* things. And the doctored photo — I'll bet it originally showed Roger, Alicia and her dad! He changed it magically so that it showed *Metford* in the photo!"

"You sound like you know a little more than you let on", Jeffries said, his eyebrows going up.

"Well, not *know*, really. Mr. Spinnet's lawyer is an old friend of my godfather's, and after the verdict she told us all about the trial. Considering that Alicia and her dad *knew* that Metford hadn't been at the wedding, it seemed logical to assume that magic was involved in changing the photo. What no one had worked out was that the real Metford had been replaced by a wizard. And I certainly don't think anyone thought he was actually *Roger*. Now, that woman who took Mr. Spinnet's place in Parliament — we suspected early on that *she* was a witch..."

It was Jeffries' turn to look shocked. "You did? How?"

"What do you know about that?" Harry demanded, gripping the foot of the bed.

Jeffries looked uncomfortable. "Well, see, when Roger was moving a bit slowly, still reluctant to marry Alicia, he was given someone to work with who was loyal to You-Know-Who, to keep an eye on him. He knew he couldn't step a toe out of line with her breathing down his neck. She also wanted to keep an eye on her son during the summer holiday, so she, well — she stuffed this Muggle family away in their own attic and took the mother's place in public. She wasn't always lurking around there though — she had other things to do, as well. Roger and I had told my mum what was going on, to get her help, as she's very shrewd. She was starting to worry that this witch was going to double-cross us, so she also volunteered to pretend to be a member of the Muggle family. She took the daughter's place. That suited this other witch just fine — she was still in the position of authority, even when they were pretending to be Muggles. And the witch was able to keep an eye on her son, just as she'd wanted. And you, as well."

"*Me?*" Harry was very confused.

Jeffries let a slow smile creep across his face. "Don't know as much as you thought, eh, Harry? Never wondered why you were working again at that estate in New Stokington?"

Harry's jaw dropped. "You mean — that witch was — was *Narcissa Malfoy?*"

"Also known as Joan Harrington-Smyth, M.P."

"Also known as Daisy Furuncle", Harry grumbled, understanding now how Mrs. Malfoy had come by some of her information.

"What?" Jeffries said, frowning. It was Harry's turn to look smug.

"There are obviously some things *you* don't know about your co-conspirators." He started to say something else, but froze when he had a sudden realization. "Wait — did you say *your mother* was masquerading as the daughter? As Felice Harrington-Smyth?" Jeffries nodded, still frowning. "But — but she — she shagged Draco Malfoy!"

Jeffries leaned forward, his eyes wide. "She *what*?"

Harry reddened. "I'm sorry. That's probably not something you should ever tell anyone about their mum, especially since your dad probably didn't —"

"Oh, it's not that. My mum and dad — well, when I was old enough, they explained to me that they'd always had 'something of an understanding', shall we say. Which was very hard for me to take at first, but it's been years now, and I reckon I've just become numb to it over time. They never married, after all. But still! My mum was shagging a seventeen-year-old boy?"

Harry started laughing suddenly; he could see that Jeffries had no idea why. "Don't you see? It was all for Narcissa Malfoy's benefit. She was supposed to be keeping an eye on her son. I *thought* it seemed like they wanted to get caught. Your mum *wanted* them to get caught. By Draco's mum. She was thumbing her nose at her."

"Among other things", Jeffries said darkly. "I doubt she thought of it as a *hardship*."

Harry remembered girls like Niamh Quirke from his other life, and their reactions to Draco Malfoy. "You're probably right. But I think she wanted her 'boss' to find out, all the same." He started to laugh again, remembering Bronwen Davies from Alicia and Roger's wedding. If Draco Malfoy knew he'd really been shagging *her*...

"So, I still don't understand how you worked out that Harrington-Smyth — the mother, that is — was a witch."

Harry had to wrack his own brain now; it had been so long, was having trouble remembering. But then an image of Draco and 'Felice' brought it back to him. "Oh! That's right. When we were in Sweden, for the broom race, Draco Malfoy told me that when he'd been meeting Felice —"

"My mum."

"Er, yeah. When they were — getting together one time, during the summer, he'd found some wizarding photos under a bed. Pictures of two

little boys."

"Ah, right. Mum told me that to fill up her spare time during the summer, she'd taken some family photos with her to Surrey. She was going to organize them in albums. You probaby found old photos of Roger and Evan, when they were small. She was working on — on a gift for my Aunt Eve. A remembrance of Evan..." He made a face. "Clearly that wasn't *all* she did with her spare time..." Jeffries closed his eyes, then opened them again. "If only I'd have been able to stay out of sight. But with my mum right under *her* nose all the time, when I was ordered to start the Rodney Jeffries show again, I had no choice. And I have to say, I was very shocked when your aunt turned up. But she seemed very lost, nowhere to go, so I let her stay on. She's, erm, a bit *bossy*." Harry nodded, his mouth twisting. "Of course, we all had it easy before the Azkaban prison break." Jeffries sighed again.

"Why?" Harry wanted to know.

"Because before that, Lucius Malfoy wasn't running the show."

It was Harry's turn to be shocked again. "Lucius Malfoy!"

Jeffries nodded. "Right. His wife had him come to the estate in Surrey, and we had a big meeting. Me, Roger — who was still pretending to be Metford — his wife, and my mum. He laid into us, saying we were just sitting around, not accomplishing anything. I was supposed to be delivering *real* numbers, huge crowds of people to be manipulated and eventually victimized, but I was constrained by the fact that a lot of people still thought of my followers as a bunch of fringe weirdoes, and that I was regarded as a bit of a charlatan by both wizards and Muggles. We needed to make the Rodney Jeffries phenomenon mainstream, and that's where the Parliament connection was going to come in. But first, Malfoy had to get the point across to us all that *he* was in charge. So he —" Jeffries choked briefly.

"What?"

"He killed Roger. In front of us all. Just like that. He said how worthless he was, how it wasn't even his idea to recruit Roger in the first place, it was his son's idea. So Roger was just — gone. And Lucius Malfoy took Roger's place as Clive Metford..."

Harry's mouth went dry, remembering the way Cedric had just been struck dead, at the moment he was deemed unnecessary, the 'spare'. Disposable people. And in a way, it was all Draco Malfoy's fault. When

he'd been trying to put his father into prison, he must have been feeding him the names of people who would make good recruits. *Bloody hell*, Harry thought; *it was probably Draco Malfoy's fault that Flint was killed by his father, and that Penelope Clearwater's family was murdered*. A newer, stronger hatred of Draco Malfoy was born in him, and he faced Jeffries with his jaw set.

"What then?"

"Well, I didn't really believe that he was *completely* in charge, as someone else had arranged for the dragons to disappear from the reservation in Sweden, hadn't they? They were used for the Azkaban operation, after all. Malfoy had still been in prison at the time. So there was someone else *he* was answering to, most likely, someone between him and You-Know-Who."

Harry nodded. "That was probably Bagman."

"Who?"

"Ludo Bagman. Works for the Ministry. Worked, I should say. Magical Games and Sports. He had business being in Sweden too, for the broom race. Dealing with the British racers and all."

Jeffries understood now. "Yes, that makes sense. But how do you know he's a Death Eater?"

Harry drew his mouth into a line. "He tried to kill me at Stonehenge, and he got sucked into Limbo with the dementors", he said shortly. Jeffries looked surprised, but didn't say anything more. Harry remembered the rogue Bludger at the Quidditch game — that had to be Bagman, too! And the way Winky had always been so convinced that he was a bad, evil wizard... she'd been in a position to see a lot of things when she'd been working for the Crouches, especially after Wormtail was using the Crouch residence as his base, to take care of Voldemort before helping him regain his body. *I'll bet Bagman wasn't just trying to help me win to make money on a bet*, Harry realized. That's what he used to think, but this made so much more sense. *He was probably the back-up plan, in case Barty Crouch, Jr. had trouble helping me to win, and he thought that he might as well make some money into the bargain...*

He remembered Bagman in Dumbledore's Pensieve, saying that he hadn't known he was passing information from the Ministry to Death Eaters. He was one of those who had walked free, one of those Barty Crouch, Jr. despised. Neither a truly loyal Death Eater nor a spy, Bagman

would have had to work rather hard to get back into Voldemort's good graces. And after Barty Crouch was kissed by a dementor, Lucius Malfoy went to prison and Peter Pettigrew was captured, he had finally been the one Voldemort had turned to. He must have been the one to cook up the entire scheme, Harry realized; a scheme more complicated than the most complicated wizarding game... and games were, after all, Bagman's business.

"I'm sorry, Harry", Jeffries choked out now. "I did mean what I wrote to you in that letter, about wanting to help people... But I had to protect my family. Roger never meant for Evan to get caught up in anything, but as time went on, we all began to realize that we had to be in this together, looking out for each other, the whole family..."

Harry glowered at him. "I was trying to save my mother and sister by changing time, and it created a nightmare of a world. You know — you've *seen* it in your nightmares. My mother thought that it would be better for our entire family to die together than for any of us to bow to *Voldemort*." Jeffries cringed at the name. "The only reason he was defeated the first time was because she gave her life for mine. I think — I think a part of her knew he wouldn't actually kill her *in place* of me, that he'd still try to kill me after her. But I also think she thought we'd all be together in death, and that that was better than being together in life if it was a life serving evil. When I changed time, I discovered just how right she was." Jeffries nodded, his eyes moist.

"Yes, you're right, you're right, of course", he whispered. "But — but not many people are as strong as your mother was, Harry. Most people will do *anything* to protect the people they love, *short* of sacrificing themselves. If there's some way to avoid that — they'll do it." He lifted his eyes to Harry's again. "You should go see your aunt", he whispered. "She's like me — the dementor who attacked her managed to get her magic, but not her soul. She's no longer a witch. You should go see her", he said again, very quietly.

Harry nodded, having lost his patience with Jeffries. "What are they going to do with you?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Probably prison, once they work out whatever the replacement for Azkaban is going to be. I won't be as much of a security risk as some, since I can't do magic. I reckon it's my destiny to go to prison in *this* world, too", he finished sadly.

Harry was about to agree with this, not feeling a bit sympathetic toward him, but suddenly, an enormous bird struck the window of Jeffries' room, the talons scratching against the glass making an awful sound. Harry covered his ears instinctively, shocked to realize, when he turned to the window, that he recognized the bird, which was pounding against the glass repeatedly. He ran to the corridor, expecting to find Nita, but she must have gone off on her rounds. There were two guards outside the room, and he shouted to both of them, "Get Dr. Anderssen! And any Aurors who are on duty! There's an Animagus Death Eater trying to get into the room!"

The guards, who appeared to be orderlies, both stood gawping at him. He thought first about how absurd his declaration must have sounded, and only secondarily about the fact that they'd seen him enter the room on a stretcher, as an apparently unconscious patient. Recognizing him for the threat that he was, they immediately stunned him.

Harry fell at their feet, face down, and did not know anything for a very long time.

Villa

Harry opened his eyes; he was lying in a hospital bed and could feel restraints keeping him in place. He sensed movement in the room and called out, "Hello? Hello? Where am I? Who's there? How many days have I been here? Please, I need someone to let me up — it's very important —"

"The Lion shall take wing."

His breath caught; he hoped that if anyone was around, they hadn't heard Sandy hissing. Footsteps crossed the room and a face he hadn't seen in almost a year appeared above him. It was Dr. Clancy, Nita's senior. It seemed that he hadn't noticed the hissing.

"Well, I can tell you that you're not being released from your bed any time soon; we don't just let murderers wander about..."

"*Murderers!*" Harry cried, forgetting about Sandy. "What are you talking about?"

"You killed that Squib!" Clancy cried. "After you were stunned, one of the guards came to fetch me, and we found him in his bed with his throat slit —"

"I didn't do that!" Harry said desperately. "Where's Nita Anderssen? There's been a misunderstanding — there are people who're probably wondering where I've been —"

"*Stupefy!*" a familiar voice called out suddenly. Harry could only see a bit of Dr. Clancy out of the corner of his eye, but once he'd been stunned, he fell out of Harry's visual range altogether, landing with a thud on the floor. Nita's face appeared above him; she removed his restraints and helped him to sit.

"What's going on?" he demanded, not sparing a thought for her stunned supervisor.

"No time —" she said, pulling on his hand. But he was stronger than she was; he planted his feet firmly and refused to be moved.

"No! Tell me what's happened! He says I killed Jeffries!"

She turned to him, her face pale and grim. "I was waiting for you outside Jeffries' room. Clancy insisted on pulling me away to discuss a case that was *months* old. And *he kept jumping up to run into his assistant's office!* It's just down the corridor, luckily, and when you came

out of the room, yelling, I heard you and came running. Unfortunately, he did, too. By the time we got there, you were stunned, and when we went into the room —" She swallowed, hesitating.

"*What?*" he prompted her, his voice cracking.

She sighed. "Jeffries' throat was slit."

Harry reeled, clutching at the wall. "I didn't do it! I swear! I would never —"

"I *know* you didn't do it, Harry! Let me finish!" Her blue eyes snapped like Ron's when she was angry, he realized; all she needed was a little glint of werewolf-red in them. He nodded at her, hoping the story wasn't much longer. "When we got into the room, we found his throat slit, and a lot of broken glass on the floor. One of the casement windows had been violently smashed. But the thing is — Clancy knows that you're a golden griffin Animagus", she said softly. "The wound — it was clearly not from a knife, or a spell. It was from an animal's claw", she finished, so softly now that Harry could barely hear her.

He felt like sobbing, remembering again the dreadful, helpless feeling of all of the evidence pointing at him, implicating him in his mother's death, as though it was premeditated. But then he remembered why he'd come running out of Jeffries' room. "It was Cho!"

Nita looked very confused. "Who?"

"Cho Chang, Viktor Krum's former girlfriend! You know, Viktor Krum who turned out to be Voldemort's *grandson*!"

Nita gasped. "No, I *didn't* know that! How would I know that?" She shook her head. "I mean — I *heard* about his Quidditch-playing, all that. He started playing during his first year at Durmstrang. But I'd left school the year before that, since my parents managed to convince the headmaster to put me with the other students my age, even though I was starting a year late..."

Harry swallowed, wondering whether that headmaster was Igor Karkaroff, whom he had seen die on Christmas night in his fifth year. Somehow he decided he didn't want to know and barreled on. "Didn't Percy tell you any of this? On the way back from Azkaban we found out that Cho is a Death Eater *and* an Animagus! She can become a giant sea-eagle, an *erne*. She must have slashed at Jeffries with her talons! He was killed by claws — but not a *griffin's* claws!" He looked at her. "Take me to

Jeffries' room." *Returning to the scene of the crime*, he thought ruefully. *I seem to have a talent for that.*

"I — I can't!" she said helplessly. "I'm already probably going to get the sack! I stunned my senior", she said ruefully, looking at the red-haired man on the floor.

Harry tried to smile reassuringly at her. "Then you've got nothing to lose."

She gave out a short, sharp laugh that made him think not of Weasleys, but of Malfoys. "Good point. But I think we'll just make sure he isn't found right away, to play it safe." She waved her wand over Clancy, transfiguring his body into a chair, which she set neatly against the wall. Harry stared, but she was all business, turning to him and eyeing him critically. "All right then, I need you to shorten your hair again."

"I thought I was supposed to be in disguise?"

"You were — but now they're *looking* for the you with long hair and a beard."

"Ah. Right." He shortened his hair again and followed her to a corner of the room.

"Secret passage", she whispered to him. "Takes us to another set of corridors visitors and patients never see. I didn't even know about them until after I took my qualifying exams. Come on."

The dark, dank, secret corridors were unguarded, although he could hear other bodies moving around them, their footsteps and conversations echoing in the distance. At last, they ascended a steep, narrow set of stone steps; Nita opened a panel in the wall and Harry stepped through after her, finding himself in Rodney Jeffries' room again.

He looked around in horror; Jeffries hadn't been moved yet, but still lay in the bed where he'd been killed, his life's blood staining his hospital smock and the crisp white sheets.

"They left him lying there all this time?" he cried, feeling ill. And yet — the blood still looked fresh, he realized, and the body wasn't starting to smell yet, although that could be a spell. His eyes stared lifelessly at Harry, as though in silent accusation. *I shouldn't have left the room*, Harry thought. *I didn't kill him, but it's my fault that he's dead.*

"All what time?" Nita said, clearly irritated. "It's been about ten minutes." Harry's head reeled. He could have sworn he had been stunned for days.

The central casement window, the one the giant eagle had been banging against, was shattered, the metal frame twisted out of shape and the floor littered with shards of glass. Harry walked forward, peering with interest at some of the glass still in the window frame.

"What's that?" Nita said sharply, seeing his attention drawn by the broken glass.

"She's hurt", he said. "Blood and feathers." He peered over the jagged, broken glass and saw that the window sill was also liberally covered in blood.

She swore, then said, "Brilliant. Now we need to worry about her bleeding to death before we find her. Although — it could be to our advantage, assuming we can find her in time. Since she's an Animagus, it's a safe assumption that she also knows how to Apparate, but she won't be able to do it with this sort of bleeding. She may not even be able to properly transform herself into a human again, not without help. She may be able to fly, a little, but the blood loss will probably make her dizzy."

He looked hopefully at Nita. "If that will slow her down, then maybe we can still get her back here. We need to go after her."

She frowned. "Yeah, I know that without having Hogwarts' Head Boy tell me", she grumbled. "The question is *how*?"

"I can fly, remember? As a griffin. The trouble is — I don't really know where we are."

"Um, yeah, you do. We're at St. Mungo's." She looked as though it turned out that he was far stupider than she'd supposed.

"No, I don't mean that. I mean — where *is* St. Mungo's? I've never come here overland, only by magic. Where in Britain is it?"

She sighed, as though relieved that he wasn't *completely* brainless. "Oh. We're on the edge of Glasgow, on a large estate. Loads of anti-Muggle charms for protection."

"Huh. I wouldn't have thought that both St. Mungo's *and* Hogwarts would both be in Scotland", he mused.

"Well, you'd have thought wrong. Actually, there's an excellent reason for why this is where it is, but I don't think we have time for that now —"

"Too right we don't. I'm going to change; you get on and I'll leap up onto the sill, then jump out." He paused for a second as he realized that Sandy's prediction was quite literal, not just the figurative sense of 'take

wing'. "Don't worry — I'll spread my wings and start flying before there's any danger to us. We're on the top floor, which helps. Then —"

"*What?* What on earth *are* you talking about?"

He grimaced at her. "You've got to come with me! I can't say incantations when I'm a griffin, or use a wand. I need someone along who can. Someone, say, who's been to Durmstrang and knows what a person might pull who's been trained in the Dark Arts..."

She gave him a half smile. "All right, all right. You're sneaky, you know that?"

He grinned at her. "I've been told that I would have done well in Slytherin."

He changed and she swung her leg over his back, gasping when he suddenly leapt up onto the window sill, and then screaming when he threw himself into space and fell for a few moments, before spreading his wings and beginning to move them. Harry could hear Nita's frightened breathing in his ears and feel her fingers laced into his mane as she held on for dear life. He flew far up in the sky over St. Mungo's, until the roof appeared small and insignificant. He could feel her heart going very fast, and she started talking nervously in a higher voice than usual, as though to hide her terror.

"What are we looking for? Oh, bloody hell, you can't answer me..."

Harry spotted something falling from a grey cloud; it almost seemed to be *part* of the cloud, but then he saw that it was a large grey and white bird. He dove; they were over the water now, and he struggled to remember what it was. *The River Clyde*. That was it. Going south, it widened and became the Firth of Clyde, where Dunoon was, and farther south still the Isle of Bute sat nestled in the firth.

He miscalculated, however, and didn't reach her in time; she struck the water with a loud *slap*! The next thing Harry knew, he was also in the water, trying not to shiver, tugging on a grey sodden wing with his teeth and coming up with just feathers. Nita let out a sharp cry of surprise when her legs entered the cold water. She grabbed one of the bird's ankles, dragging it to shore as Harry swam sideways against the strong current, his mind almost numb with cold. When they were on land again, he transformed, and with red, chilled hands, he and Nita pulled the enormous injured bird onto dry land.

Harry took his wand from his pocket to restore her to her human form; Cho Chang lay on the ground between them, a deep gash in her side that looked far worse on her than it had on the eagle, even with its blood-stained feathers. Nita sank to her knees, drawing her wand and immediately starting to move it over the wound, shaking her head.

"I hope we're not too late", she murmured. "It looks like she's lost a lot of blood. She probably didn't get very far because blood loss was already making her disoriented; she was probably flying in circles. The clotting spell I've performed will keep her from losing any more blood, and give us time to get back. But it's only temporary." Harry nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He was still shaking, either from nerves or the cold river water, he wasn't sure which. Cho had become for Nita yet another patient. He didn't dare say what he thought of saving her life, but merely watched Nita conjure a stretcher for her, then a sheet to cover Cho's body up to the chin.

As they walked across the broad grounds with the stretcher floating before them, Harry realized, "I know why it's St. Mungo's. I remember now..."

She looked up, interested. "Remember? You acted like you never knew anything about it to begin with. Or do you mean that you remember it from your other life?"

His jaw dropped as he stopped and stared at her. "How do you know about that?"

She ticked it off on her fingers. "Well, there's Peggy — Maggie, that is — who told me about seeing your double auras when she first met you; there's Ron, who told me quite a lot about it, and then Ginny —"

Harry swallowed, wondering what *she* had told her sister. "What did she say?"

Nita shrugged. "She told me how it happened, and that you were her stalker in that life." He couldn't tell whether she was mocking him as waved her wand, moving the stretcher carrying Cho. "And she told me that you had met me, and that I was a nurse, not a doctor."

Harry nodded. "That's right."

"So — *did* you remember something about St. Mungo from your other life?"

"Kind of... did Ginny tell you that my mother was married to Severus Snape in that life?"

Nita was gawping at him now. "No, she evidently forgot to mention that. And he's going to be my brother-in-law!"

"Right. Well, I remember now that he taught me this rhyme that his great-grandmother taught *him* when he was a boy, when he came up to Glasgow to visit her. She died of grief soon after his parents were killed, he told me. He'd already been sent to live with his uncle in Dunoon. Anyway, he taught me and my sister and brothers the rhyme, and the legends about St. Mungo, who was a wizard." He recited:

*It is the bird that never flew
It is the tree that never grew
It is the bell that never rang
It is the fish that never swam.*

Nita nodded. "Sounds almost like an incantation, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, I always thought so. It's just referring to the things on the Glasgow coat of arms: a bird, tree, bell and fish. They all have to do with St. Mungo. The fish has a ring in its mouth, but I can't remember the story about why..."

"I knew it once", she said. "Here we are", she said in a brisk, businesslike tone as they reached the drive before the enormous building that housed the only wizarding hospital in Great Britain. The large multipaned windows set in the sandstone facade looked blind and indifferent to the plight of people with magical maladies and injuries. But as they approached the door, Harry saw over the lintel the seal described obliquely by the nonsense rhyme he'd learned as a small boy: the bird that never flew, the tree that never grew, the bell that never rang and the fish that never swam. Over all, at the top of the shield, was the image of a bishop with a miter, hand lifted in a blessing. St. Mungo.

"We're not going in this way", Nita said, turning to the left. "This way. Except —" She waved her wand over his clothes to transform them into peach-colored robes, like hers.

"I'm going to impersonate a *doctor* now?" he squeaked. "Is that wise?"

"Quiet", she said tersely. "Just try to look — like you know what you're doing." She waved her wand and conjured clipboards for them. Harry followed her silently. When they were inside the building and walking the corridors, she seemed to be looking around for something. Harry hoped she'd find it soon; he was feeling *more* conspicuous, not less, in the doctor's robes, walking behind her and the stretcher bearing Cho. He smoothed his fringe over his scar repeatedly and tried not to jump at every little sound.

Finally, Nita conducted the stretcher into a room; Harry backed into the room cautiously, watching the people in the corridors carefully until the door was finally closed. She commanded him to lock it securely, which he did, and to guard it while she worked. It seemed to take a very long time, and Nita left through a secret passage twice to get some supplies (potion and salve). Finally, not taking his eye from the door, he asked, "May I ask why you're so interested in saving her?"

She gave an irritated grunt. "Well, if you're all that anxious to go to prison for murder, I can just let her die —"

"What?" He turned from the door.

Nita looked at him again as though he were an idiot. "She's your alibi! The real murderer! A dead Animagus is not identifiable as such. She needs to be alive for anyone to be able to tell that she's the murderer. Now, it *does* help that her blood is on the glass in his room, and the glass being on the floor clearly indicates that it was broken from the outside, not the inside. But we need a motive, also —"

He shook his head. "She wasn't mentioned at all when Jeffries was telling me everything that had happened. Voldemort was, of course, and other Death Eaters." He took a deep breath before saying, "Your aunt and uncle were mentioned."

She wiped a tear from her eye. "I thought as much." Her voice sounded a little thick and he could see her swallow. She looked back to Cho. "We just have to wait now. To see whether she's going to be all right. In a way, right here where you disappeared — in St. Mungo's, that is — is probably the safest place for you. And me." She laughed. "To think, I've been associating with a pack of Death Eaters all these years, and when I'm aiding and abetting a fugitive, it turns out to be Harry Potter!"

He sat next to her. "No one will be looking into this room? I think I should Apparate back to Hog's End..."

She shook her head. "It's supposed to be refurbished as an office soon. All of the rooms in this wing will be. But the work isn't to start for a few days. We should be fine. Hog's End is the first place they'd look for you, anyway, even if you could Apparate out of here, which you can't. Security has made that impossible. You either get here by Floo, in the entrance hall, by ambulance, or on foot." She gazed at Cho Chang's face with an expression Harry couldn't read, but Nita didn't look especially happy. Harry covered her hand with his.

"How did your parents take it? Your adopted parents. About your being a Weasley?"

She slipped her hand from under his and clasped her hands around her knees. "They don't know", she whispered. "I haven't been able to bring myself to speak to any of *them* about my family. I certainly couldn't speak to Aunt Cissy about what was going on —"

He nodded. "Especially as it turns out she was impersonating an MP and your uncle was impersonating the whip, taking Roger Davies' place —"

She frowned in confusion. "What?"

Harry told her what Jeffries had said. With each successive surprise, her eyes grew wider. "No wonder a Death Eater was sent to kill him, if he was telling you all that!" she said. "But hang on — how would anyone *know* that he was telling you all that?"

Harry hesitated for only a moment. "Third eyes. We were finding them all over Ascog Castle this summer, and Cecilia — Mr. Spinnet's lawyer is a witch — found more of them in her office, which explains why the witnesses who were going to testify at the trial on his behalf all mysteriously didn't show. They were sent letters on her firm's stationery, too."

She smacked herself in the forehead very hard, looking quite angry. "*So stupid!* I should never have let him talk to you *there!* I should have moved the two of you."

He nodded at Cho. "You really think she'll be all right? I won't be accused of murder?"

Nita looked grim. "I think so. Good thing I found you when I did. Damn Clancy —"

Harry thought about her senior again. "You don't suppose — is Clancy a Death Eater?"

She looked at him with wide eyes. "He — he might be", she said very softly.

"Right", Harry said, nodding. "I think it's time we got your little brother Percy up here with some of his Auror friends to take care of Dr. Clancy."

* * *

It had been a very, very long day. Sitting in the Hog's End kitchen eating a late dinner with Ron, Hermione, Ginny, the twins, Lee, Angelina and the babies was very strange when, mere hours before, it was possible that Harry was again going to be accused of murder. As it was, he'd been questioned for hours and was under house arrest; two Aurors from the Ministry guarded the front and back doors of the house, which had been taken off the Floo network. Wards prevented anyone from Apparating. (And an alarm would go off if anyone transformed into an Animagus, which meant Hermione couldn't do it either.) It was better than cooling his heels in a cell at the Ministry, however, and Harry was grateful that Percy had enough pull to swing this arrangement.

Dinner seemed to take far longer than usual, as Harry was recounting what Jeffries had told him while everyone else interrupted to ask questions. When they were just starting in on pudding, Percy and Katie entered from the hall, throwing themselves down on the sofa near the fire, looking exhausted. Katie slumped against Percy, her eyes closed.

Ron turned his chair around and asked excitedly, "So?"

Percy smiled at them all. "Nita still has her job and Harry's off the hook and is officially no longer under house arrest", he said, his voice very tired. "We sent the Ministry blokes off before we came in here. Would you like to see it in writing that you're no longer a murder suspect?" He pulled a roll of parchment out of his robes and tossed it to Harry, obviously too tired to walk the few feet between the sofa and where Harry was sitting at the long kitchen table. Harry caught it deftly and unrolled it, reading it aloud.

After the first few words, however, he was drowned out by a cheer going up around the table and Ginny threw her arms around his neck, kissing his face all over. A feeling of relief washed over him as he read, and he sagged in his chair. He saw that Ginny was crying and laughing at the same time; he laughed and kissed the tip of her nose before gathering her to him, holding her tightly, the crumpled parchment now abandoned on

the table with the dirty dishes. After stroking her hair affectionately for a moment, he rose and walked to the sofa, extending his hand to Percy, who shook it without standing.

"Thanks, Perce. I really —"

"Oh, don't thank me. The evidence was very clearly not pointing to you, once anyone bothered to take notice of it. The victim's blood was under Cho Chang's toenails, from when she'd slashed at him with her talons; she was questioned for a long time, and without Veritaserum, so no one can contest the results of the interrogation. Plus, since she trained up properly under McGonagall and was a registered Animagus, there are Ministry records of her Animagus form, photographs, all that. And other people at St. Mungo's saw a giant sea eagle flying past their windows. We had her dead to rights. She came clean and even offered to name other names, other Death Eaters. Although —"

Harry frowned. "What?"

Percy cleared his throat. "She didn't have very many nice things to say about *you*."

"I'm not exactly surprised. Because of me, Lucius Malfoy put her under Imperius, then I fixed her up with a bloke who turned out to be Voldemort's grandson *and* then he died because of me — second dead boyfriend in two years that she can blame on me."

Katie sat up now, stretching sleepily. "There is some more good news, though. She corroborated a lot of the story you said Jeffries told you."

Harry stared, confused. "She did? How?"

"Turns out she was in on a lot of it, too. She was a go-between for Bagman and Roger Davies early on. Being an Animagus helped with that. Jeffries probably didn't know. Actually, we've been finding more and more Death Eaters who were involved in that whole operation, and some of them didn't even know about each other. For security, I reckon. You-Know-Who always worked like that. Some were just involved in the Parliament side, some were part of Jeffries' organization, keeping an eye on him, some were involved in stealing the dragons, others were part of the Azkaban breakout."

Harry shook his head, pacing restlessly. "I can't believe we thought Voldemort wasn't doing *anything* all this time, when all of this was going on!"

Percy rose wearily and walked to the table, helping himself to some apple pie. "I can. They kept it scattered, so it seemed random and unpredictable. Who would have thought anyone would try to steal a herd of dragons? Who would have thought the Gringotts surrender was meant to lure Aurors to Azkaban? Who would have thought the dragons would be used to break prisoners out of there? And then there were the dementors..." He shuddered for a moment before putting a large piece of pie into his mouth.

Harry sat next to Ginny again with a sigh of relief. "Thank god they're gone now, before they could do *too* much damage..."

Fred and George looked at each other. "Erm — you don't know?" Fred said uncertainly. Harry had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Know what?" he finally managed to say.

"They were being released in fits and starts, here and there", Fred said grimly. "When I'm traveling, sometimes I can't find a handy wizarding pub to stay in, or I just don't want to be seen by wizards, so I go to a Muggle pub instead; I was sitting in the bar of a pub a bit east of here, having a drink and watching the telly, when this news reader came on with a horrible story about entire villages being hit by dementors." Fred saw Harry's shock and hurried on. "That's not what he said, of course. He called it an 'inexplicable outbreak of hysteria'. Except there were also experts from all over the country saying they'd never seen hysteria like this. People going all quiet, like, and not paying attention to what they were doing anymore. There were some who had jobs — like bus drivers — who were killing people because they weren't taking proper notice of what they were doing, and no one cared — the dead bodies just piled up. People stopped eating and died from starvation. Little kids who hadn't been hit by the dementors didn't have anyone to take care of them, and some of *them* were dying from neglect — just awful." He swallowed and shook his head. "The first story I heard like it, I popped back here; George and Lee and I went to the villages that had been hit, taking chocolate. That helped some people who'd just had the happiness sucked out of them. But not —"

"— not the ones who'd been Kissed", Harry finished softly.

"*The hopeless ones shall walk the earth...*" Hermione said in a quiet sing-song. They all looked at her. "The Prophecy Maggie gave at Fraserburgh."

"Fraserburgh!" Fred exclaimed suddenly. "That was one of the villages!"

"Oh no!" Harry said, gripping the edge of the table, remembering the people gathered at the football game he'd attended, cheering on "The Broch" and enjoying a good rivalry.

"What — what about other villages in the area? Er —" he struggled, trying to remember the names of the places along the coast.

"Um, Peterhead, I think. A caravan park was hit... Inveralochy? Does that sound right, George?" His twin nodded, looking like he could use some chocolate now.

Hermione gasped. "We — we thought the Prophecy was just about what happened at Stonehenge. But the dementors were abroad even before that —"

George sighed, putting his arm protectively around Angelina's shoulders. "Right. Those things need to feed. The Death Eaters couldn't just keep them holed up somewhere. They probably didn't want to spend too much time with them, anyway. They needed to give the dementors something to keep them going —"

"Why didn't you tell anyone about this?" Harry demanded.

"We did!" Fred said hotly, looking stricken at the suggestion. "Percy. Aurors were all over northeastern Scotland, looking for those damn things. But they were gone again."

"The dragons", Harry muttered. "They were probably transported by dragon to a site just long enough to feed, then taken away again before the authorities could show up..."

"Right", Katie agreed. "We never actually encountered any of them." She shuddered. "I couldn't believe what it was like when so many of them were together at Stonehenge. *The cold*. Took me back to my fourth year all over again..."

Hermione pounded the table, making the crockery jump. "I've fallen dreadfully behind in reading the papers from my parents! I'll bet there was something in there!"

Ron rubbed her back gently, looking grim. "It's not your fault. And the stories wouldn't have actually mentioned dementors anyway, would they? From what Fred said, the Muggle news wasn't very clear about what was going on."

"But — but if I'd just read between the lines —"

"Dementors!" Harry exclaimed suddenly, remembering that he had another reason for visiting St. Mungo's. "I never did get to see my aunt!"

Katie nodded. "That'll have to wait. It was decided that, now that she was talking, the best thing to do was to take her back to Surrey. I went with her. Familiar face."

"Erm, is everything all right, Katie? How did my uncle take her coming back?"

"Oh, all of that was fine. Along the way, though, she had some *choice* words to say to me. You know, about my having been dating you last summer and now being married to Percy. Charming woman, your aunt. Has she considered the foreign service? Life as a diplomat?" she suggested, her mouth twisting. Harry laughed, then sobered.

"Sorry. Was she really dreadful to you?" He shook his head. "Sounds like she's back to normal all right. I reckon I can wait a little to visit, in that case." Katie rolled her eyes; perhaps she had hoped that the dementor had sucked Petunia Dursley's acrimony from her. Then he thought of something else and frowned at Percy. "What I don't get is — how did Cho go from killing Jeffries to keep him from talking to talking so much herself?"

Percy shrugged. "We've seen that a lot. Loyal Death Eaters, carrying out orders, *until* they get caught. Then they're falling over themselves to name names. Not all that odd, really." He gave them un-Percy-like sly grin. "Rumors have been circulating in the Ministry cell blocks that something far *worse* than Azkaban is being cooked up to replace it, and no one wants to find out first-hand what it's going to be."

Ron goggled at him. "Worse than Azkaban? What could be worse than dementors?"

Fred, perfectly serious, said, "They must have heard they're all going to be locked up in one big room while Percy reads his old cauldron-bottom reports to them day and night..."

Everyone broke up at that, even Percy and Katie. Ron, Lee and the twins cleared the table and started the dishes washing themselves while Angelina left to put the babies to bed with help from Hermione, who was cooing over little Rufus on her way out. Harry left for the drawing room with Ginny, glancing over his shoulder at the jovial cleaning-up.

"I never saw any of them lift a finger at the Burrow; your mum must be pleased that they're finally doing housework here."

She let out a snort of laughter for a second. "You don't understand. Fred and George used to *beg* mum to let them help around the house. Total chaos. But there's no one here to stop them. Percy and Katie are busy being Aurors and Angelina has her hands full with two babies, so they can't be bothered. Someone has to do it. They have fun and just use `reparo' quite liberally whenever anything breaks. Which is at least a few times a day."

She grinned at him and opened the drawing room door. Although it was a month past the start of spring, the nights were still cold, so Harry started a fire in the grate and settled down with her on one of the couches, feeling very domestic and settled and trying not to think about the close call he'd almost had with going back to prison. Ginny's cat, MacKenzie, curled up on Ginny's lap and purred softly while Harry petted her.

A minute later, Percy and Katie joined them, sitting in quiet companionship on another couch. For a moment, Katie's eyes met Harry's; she looked happy and content, giving him a very small nod before closing her eyes and leaning her head on Percy's shoulder. Harry gathered Ginny to him, sighing with satisfaction; the cat removed herself to the hearth rug, where she curled in a black circle and tucked her nose under her tail.

Harry remembered apologizing to Katie after leaving her flat and kissing her, on their first date, and her saying to him, "*You thought you could get yourself to forget the other girl? It's all right, Harry. Do you mind — do you mind if I ask you if it's Ginny Weasley?*" Katie had known all along that it was Ginny. He turned and pressed his lips to Ginny's brow before leaning back and closing his eyes. If only he'd known then that she didn't really love Draco Malfoy, and that Malfoy's cousin was really Ginny's sister...

He opened his eyes wide again and sat up. "Percy — are you sure Nita's all right? You said she still has her job — but what about her senior, Dr. Clancy? She thought he might be —"

"A Death Eater? Right in one. He's in custody, although he's no longer a chair. It did make it easier to bring him in; we waited until we had him secured to transfigure him again", he added, smirking. "Turns out that he knew what Jeffries was telling you because he was monitoring it from his assistant's office using a third eye that matched one where you were. He contacted Cho Chang to take care of the problem, since he couldn't risk incriminating himself; he reckoned that with you being a known golden griffin Animagus now, it wouldn't be too hard to pin on you once he

messed about with the evidence. Good thing Nita stunned him when she did, before he could complete the frame-up. Now, if you don't mind my putting aside work for once, Harry —" Percy said sleepily, leaning his head on Katie's again.

Harry gawped at him. "That's why he kept leaping up when he was supposed to be talking to Nita! Well, then, if he's not an issue... I just wasn't sure that Nita was really all right. Are you sure she should have gone back to her flat all alone? What if someone ambushes her there? I only just found out today that Narcissa Malfoy is really Harrington-Smyth — there probably hasn't been time to track her down and capture her yet. Has there? What if —" He stopped, seeing Percy and Katie's sly glances.

"I think Nita's fine, Harry. No, we haven't got her `aunt' in custody yet, but she's not spending the night alone", Katie told him, a smile twisting the corners of her mouth.

"She's — oh, good. Someone's protecting her, then? She has somewhere else to go?"

Katie looked merry, like she had a secret. "The same `somewhere' she's been going for a couple of weeks now. My dad's flat."

Harry's jaw dropped. "What? Nita — your dad —"

Katie snuggled down in Percy's arms again, looking very happy. "That's right. I haven't seen him this cheerful since — well, never, really."

"I think they're good for each other", Percy proclaimed, sounding more like his old pompous self.

"Huh", Harry said, not having expected this. "She didn't say anything..."

"She wouldn't, would she? Nita's not — not used to sharing things. Maggie told me she's been trying to draw her out a bit, but it's like pulling teeth", Ginny said knowingly.

"But your dad went to prison because of Lucius Malfoy!" he said to Katie.

"She doesn't exactly go about singing his praises anymore", Katie observed.

Ginny nodded and drew Harry's head back to her shoulder. "Settle down", she said sleepily. "Spend some time with me before we have to go off to our separate rooms..."

Just as she was saying this, the drawing room door opened, admitting Ron, Hermione and the twins. George looked rather surprised.

"You're joking, right?" George asked, staring to guffaw.

Harry jerked his head around and stared at George. "About what?"

"About going off to separate rooms. Do you think there's any point to pretending that the four of you", he pointed at Ron and Hermione, in addition to Harry and Ginny, "aren't going to do a little bed-swapping in the middle of the night? Couldn't you at least have a little consideration for the rest of us and not make a racket with the creaking floorboards and doors? Just go to bed where you're actually going to be and stop pretending..."

Harry gawped at George. "But — but — Ginny — brothers —" He knew he wasn't being coherent, but he couldn't seem to form a sentence, he was so shocked.

"You can thank Ron", George informed him. "Of course, it's not like he doesn't have a self-interest. *He* gets to spend the night with *his* girlfriend..." This made Hermione turn deep red; she looked like she wanted to flee the room.

"Actually", Ron said, straightening up so that he towered over the twins, "I prefer to think of it as my having learned to be mature about it all", he said in the most pompous voice Harry had ever heard him use. "Harry is my best friend", he said nobly; "Ginny is —"

"Oh, yes", George said, rolling his eyes, "you're being quite mature about it because then you and Hermione can —"

"George!" Ginny said sharply, seeing Hermione's discomfort. "*Shut up!*"

George merely grinned with amusement. "I'm just saying —"

Harry noticed that Fred was between Ron and George still, his hands deep in his pockets, giving Harry a very hostile look. "Are you all right, Fred?" Harry asked uncertainly. Fred hadn't been pleased to find him and Ginny in bed together the last time Harry had stayed at Hog's End. Fred's closed mouth moved about as though there were some very choice words he wanted to say. Suddenly, George smacked him sharply on the back of the head.

"Hey!" Fred exclaimed.

"Yeah. He's fine, aren't you *Alfred*? Not going to make any trouble, *are* you?" his twin said pointedly.

Fred put his hand on the back of his head. "Do you want to be hexed?" he demanded.

Harry stifled his laughter; he looked at Ginny, who, to his surprise, was turning a bright red to match Hermione. *He* certainly hadn't known anything about any bed-swapping; evidently, Ron was planning for it to be a surprise.

"Tell him, Ron", George said quietly; Harry only caught it by reading George's lips.

Ron smiled as though he had a secret and leaned over to whisper something to Fred, who started laughing. "Oh, okay. That's all right, then."

Ron clapped him on the shoulder, grinning. "I thought you'd think so."

Fred looked a little uncertain for a moment. "Are you absolutely sure?"

Ron continued to grin and laid his finger alongside his nose. "Trust me."

Fred laughed again and threw himself into a chair. "Thanks, little brother", he said, although Ron was more than a few inches taller than him now.

"Ah, I see", Harry said quickly. "It's a trick. We'll find that we have a bed of nails, or there's a spell on the room so we fall into a deep sleep the second we walk in the door..."

Ron looked affronted. "Not at all! This is — everyone behaving like adults", he said in oddly sober voice; the twins looked like they were ready to burst. "Although for *some* of us there are fringe benefits..." His eyes slid toward Hermione again.

"Oh, Ginny!" Hermione said in a strangled voice, very pointedly changing the subject. "You should have seen the babies having their baths. Rowena was being so adorable..."

A terrified look abruptly crossed Ron's face and he mouthed the word *babies* to Harry. "Harry, how about a game of chess?" he said, standing quickly. Harry tried not to laugh and agreed, kissing Ginny on the head, then following Ron across the room to the chessboard. As they set up the board, Ron shook his head, looking across the room at Hermione telling Ginny every cunning thing Rufus and Rowena had done while Angelina was bathing them and getting them ready for bed. He shook his head, starting to play.

"Don't worry, Ron", Harry said, grinning, making his first move. "She probably doesn't want to have kids right away —" He felt like getting a little revenge. He still wasn't sure what was going to greet him when he and Ginny went to sleep in his room later.

"Babies", Ron said again, taking Harry's pawn. "*Urgh.*" Harry just laughed.

* * *

"So."

"So."

They stood looking at each other nervously, the door of Harry's room closed securely. Harry was very aware of the bed out of the corner of his eye and both his and Ginny's bags at the foot. So far they hadn't experienced any ill effects from just walking into his bedroom, but it was like waiting for the other shoe to drop. There had to be a good reason for Ginny's brothers to agree to let her spend the night in Harry's room.

"Well..."

"Well", she said in a falsely bright voice, looking as though she'd never seen the room.

This is stupid, he thought. *It's not as though we haven't done this before.* But then he realized that it wasn't strictly true. They'd never spent the night together, except for the two nights in this same room, one during which Harry stayed on the window seat, and one during which *Fred* slept on the window seat. They'd made love once more since the Hogsmeade trip, although they'd had two opportunities. Both chances were Saturday afternoons spent in Maggie's rooms; she'd wanted to make up for helping to get Harry suspended and invited them to tea, then grinned at them and left. They didn't have to worry about being out of Gryffindor Tower during the patrols, they didn't have to worry about being someplace where Harry had been with Hermione. It was perfect. (Although Ron's reaction later left something to be desired.)

The next Saturday, Maggie had arranged to give them her rooms again, but this time Ron had scheduled them for an early morning Quidditch practice and thoroughly exhausted them. They went to meet Maggie, still in their Quidditch gear, and when she left them alone this time, they both promptly collapsed onto her bed and fell into a deep slumber. When she returned, tentatively creeping into the room, she woke them with her laughter.

"I thought there was a *different* reason for the pair of you to miss dinner. I didn't think it was excessive *napping.*" She'd had a hard time restraining her laughter. They'd had to leave in order to get back to

Gryffindor Tower before the nine o'clock deadline, and along the way, Ginny had stopped and apologized to Harry.

"Don't apologize; I fell asleep, too", he reminded her, kissing her on the forehead.

"It's just that — I feel like we wasted a perfectly good opportunity —"

"Now, I won't hear any more of that. Time spent in bed with you under *any* circumstances isn't a waste of time, as far as I'm concerned. I want to spend a lot of time in bed with you in the years to come, and not just doing the first thing that comes to mind", he said, starting to nibble at her neck. She laughed at first, then sighed.

"And what sort of things aren't the *obvious* things?" she asked, punctuated by a gasp as he brought his mouth up to her ear.

"Sleeping, reading, talking into the night, eating snacks and getting crumbs in the sheets, doing crossword puzzles..." he murmured, breathing warmly into her ear. She shivered.

"Keep that up and I'm dragging you back to Maggie's. You don't do crosswords", she said suddenly, pulling back and looking at his face.

He shrugged. "I know. My dad did. I reckon, when I think of being with you... I remember seeing them that night..."

"The night they died", she whispered, bringing her hand up to cup his cheek in her palm.

He nodded. "I just — that's why — when I had the chance —"

"— to save your mum, yes, ssshh, I know —"

And she was holding him and kissing his neck while he tried to calm down again. Finally, he backed up from her and smiled the best that he could. "Anyway, we should get back to the common room... And no more about wasted time in bed, all right?"

She smiled at him, making his heart leap. "All right. I promise."

They stood now in his large, sparsely furnished room and continued to stare at each other awkwardly, hearing the other Weasleys bustling about in the upstairs corridor, bidding each other goodnight and going to their rooms.

"Um, I'm going to brush my teeth and use the loo. Be right back", she said quickly.

Harry swallowed and paced for a moment. Had Ron and the twins planned a surprise for them? It was nerve-wracking not to know. While he waited, he took his pajama trousers out and quickly changed into them. He

wore nothing from the waist up, as usual, save for his basilisk pendant and Sandy around his arm. He started to creep his hand toward the pendant, but thought better of it. Instead, he checked his breath and grimaced, then took his toothbrush out of his bag. When he walked down the corridor to the bathroom, however, it was not Ginny but Hermione who was leaving it, carrying a small bag which she quickly thrust behind her back. He stared at her guilty-looking face, perplexed.

"Is everything okay, Hermione?" he asked, not sure he wanted an answer.

"Okay? Erm, of course. Everything is fine. Everything is as it *should* be."

She was speaking in a queer high voice, but before he could say anything else to her she was skittering away from him toward her and Ron's room. Ginny practically ploughed into him as she left the bathroom, and her face immediately turned a deep red.

"Oh, well, there you are", she said, every bit as queer as Hermione. Harry had no idea what was going on. Had Ron and the twins given Ginny something in her food to make her act strangely? If so, the joke might be on Ron; Hermione seemed to have eaten it, too.

"Yeah. Tooth-brushing time for me too", he explained, waving his brush as though it was a wand. She smiled, her gaze lingering for a moment on his chest. He suddenly wished he had brought a dressing gown, in case one of her brothers found them standing in the corridor like this and changed their minds about them spending the night together.

She practically ran to the bedroom while he entered the bathroom. When he emerged, the corridor was quiet and empty. He was very conscious of every step he took making the floor creak and groan. Once back in the bedroom, he found that Ginny was in bed already, the covers pulled up to her chin, seemingly asleep. He walked around the bed and climbed in, extinguishing the candles. The waning moon cast a silvery light over the room.

"Ginny?" he whispered to her, lying on his left side, wondering what was going on.

"Yes, Harry?" she whispered back, lying very still, not moving anything but her lips.

"Is everything all right?"

She opened her eyes and looked at him; even in the moonlight, Harry could see that she looked very unhappy.

"What is it, Ginny?" he said, his hand going to her cheek instinctively, a knot starting to form in his stomach. What could be upsetting her so?"

"It's stupid, really", she said in a muffled voice, turning her head to the pillow so that his hand was on the back of her head now.

"What?"

She sat up abruptly and held the sheet and blanket against her front in a defensive posture. "Well — here we are, and — and we can't *do* anything because — because —"

Harry sat up, frowning in confusion. "Just because your brothers know we're in here? Or because they're not fighting it? What? I don't understand."

"No, my brothers have nothing to do with it", she said impatiently. "This is me —"

"We can't do anything because of you", Harry said slowly, trying to understand. "But you *want* to do something? Forgive me, but I still don't —"

She huffed impatiently. "Harry! Ron — Ron isn't the only one in the family who has — who has something *happen* to him once a month —" She looked at him with wide eyes, waiting for him to understand and looking like she hoped she didn't have to be more clear.

"Oh!" Harry said immediately. "Why didn't you say so? Is that all? That's why you're so upset?" It never occurred to him that there was a simple biological reason.

A tear rolled down her cheek and he wiped it away with his thumb, pressing his palm to her cheek again, smiling at her. "I know all about that kind of thing, Ginny. I was the only one home when it happened to Jamie the first time, and I had to help her. Plus, I *did* have Hermione for my girlfriend for over a year!" Now she looked even more upset about his mentioning Hermione, and he struggled to repair the new damage. "I just meant — you wouldn't believe the lecture Hermione gave me about this. Complete with charts and graphs. No, really. I am *not* making this up", he said, laughing.

She was also laughing now, which was a big improvement over her being jealous. "You should have seen Ron after she gave him *his* lecture",

Harry went on. "He looked like he would have preferred to take his O.W.L.s again. This is a *good* thing!"

"Good!" she said. "Said like someone who's never had to go through it."

"I didn't mean — listen, at least we know the potion is working, that it hasn't worn off, right?" She conceded this with a nod. "You shouldn't be upset! I told you before — no time in bed with you is ever wasted. Just having you next to me is wonderful. I'm going to be very spoiled after a week when I have to go back to school and sleep alone again..." He leaned toward her and kissed her on the lips lightly, then her brow. She sighed deeply.

"I just thought — what timing! For all of them — except Fred, until Ron said something to him — to be all right with this, and then —"

"Ron!" Harry said suddenly. "He knew! *That's* why he was all right with our spending the night together. And he told Fred — so that's why Fred calmed down. And Ron may have told Percy and George before that —"

Ginny frowned. "How could Ron know when we were downstairs? *I* didn't find out until I went to the loo — and then I had to yell for Hermione to bring me something —"

Harry pointed to his nose. "Werewolf, Ginny. He smelled the blood."

She looked indignant. "Why that big overgrown —"

He interrupted her by pulling her face to his and claiming her mouth; when he pulled back again, she seemed to have lost her train of thought and had a little smile that made him think all too vividly of what they *wouldn't* be doing. "Don't be angry with Ron, Ginny. "Listen — we get to sleep in the same bed every night during the holiday without your brothers killing me. I never expected anything so wonderful this week... don't be angry with Ron. He's done us a big favor, really. Come on — let's get some rest."

She gave him a small smile and put her head on the pillow, and he also rested his head, gazing into her eyes. After a moment, however, she whispered, "I need to roll over. Sorry to turn my back on you, but I can never start off on my right side", she explained.

He grinned at the back of her head. "I don't mind; that's one more thing I've learned about you." He kissed her cheek tenderly. "Good night, Ginny. I love you."

She turned her face to his and caught his lips. "I love you too, Harry. Good night."

He put his head down again, snaking his arm around her waist; she pulled his hand against her stomach and sighed for a moment, but soon exhaustion overwhelmed her and her deep, regular breathing told him she was fast asleep.

* * *

He fell into bed every night, almost unconscious before his head hit the pillow. Hermione was putting him and Ron through their paces getting ready for the practical N.E.W.T.s during the day, and for the written exams in the evenings. Percy and the twins allowed them to turn a large part of the garden into a practice area, and after spending the first three mornings of the holiday fighting Chthonians they'd created from sowing dragons' teeth in the loamy soil, Hermione was finally satisfied that they could move on to something else. Harry loved waking up next to Ginny in the mornings, watching her sleep a little before she opened her eyes and gazed up at him lovingly, then holding her in his arms and kissing her into wakefulness, although neither one of them felt much like getting up after that, rather than just lying together in a heap of tangled sheets and blankets.

Finally, on Thursday, Hermione allowed him, Ginny and Ron to get in some Quidditch practice. Ginny only blocked one-third of the balls Ron sent sailing toward the improvised hoops in the garden of Hog's End, but he was impressed that she'd blocked that many, and so was Harry, given Ron's unstoppable nature. After they'd eaten dinner, she asked whether anyone needed to use the loo before she took a shower, which she said she needed to relax her aching muscles. Harry knew that she ached from trying to block Ron's goals, and that she'd be exhausted when she came to bed. He wasn't as tired as when he'd played a real game of Quidditch, as no one was trying to catch the Snitch before him or brain him with a Bludger. While she showered, he changed into his pajamas and crawled into bed, knowing that he should reread some of his History of Magic book but instead picking up *Flying with the Cannons* yet again.

"The Daughter and Lion shall be one."

He swallowed, looking down at Sandy, on his left arm as usual. "What?"

He didn't get an answer, however, for a moment later, the bedroom door had opened and Ginny entered, wearing her old plaid dressing gown, her hair not completely dry but sleeked back from her face, making her dark eyes look very large.

"Feeling better?" he asked extending his hand. She walked to the bed and took it.

"A bit. You didn't peek?" she asked him with a mischievous glint in her eye.

"Now, I only do that when you've expressly instructed me to", he said, pretending to be more shocked than he was. It wasn't as though he hadn't been *tempted*.

She laughed, then groaned, tilting her head back and forth. "I don't suppose you could give me a little neck rub? That practice today... I've become soft, I think."

"Of course you haven't! Although we'll probably need to have intense practices every day next week for Saturday's match." He directed her to turn around and sit on the edge of the bed. He sat behind her, his legs flanking hers, and moved her damp coil of hair out of the way to access her neck. It was difficult with her dressing gown in the way, so he pulled it off her shoulders — only to find that she wasn't wearing anything else under it.

His breathing sped up; he stared as if transfixed at her upper back, water from her shower still beading between her shoulder blades. *We can't really do anything*, he reminded himself as he committed himself to just moving his hands over her shoulders and neck. When she squirmed backwards, however, he knew that she could feel that this was having an effect on him, and he could have *sworn* that he heard her give a very small giggle.

He couldn't resist breathing warmly on her neck, enjoying the shiver he sent through her; he continued to move his hands over her shoulders, then lightly tickled them down her back and up to her neck again. His stomach flipped when she responded by tipping her head back and groaning, arching her spine a little. When she did this he had a clear view for a moment of her bare chest, also still glistening with shower water, and that did nothing for his self control. Harry pressed his lips to her neck, even while knowing that he shouldn't torture himself much longer this way.

However, just as he was about to say something about it, Ginny said, "Harry?"

"Mmm?" he responded, his mouth still on her neck. Before she went on speaking she heaved a great contented sigh.

"The reason why my brothers let us share a room... well, let's just say that what was true five days ago is no longer true. I think they forgot that it's not a permanent condition..."

He lifted his head and looked at her; she turned to face him, the desire in her eyes making her meaning very clear. She had only to lean forward a half inch to capture his lips with hers; Harry felt an enormous relief roll through him. They didn't have to hold back, they didn't have to pretend this wasn't what they wanted. As they kissed, Harry slipped his hands under her arms and cupped her breasts in his palms, pressing his chest to her back, the basilisk amulet between them. She gasped into his mouth, arching her back again, pushing herself into his hands. He moved his lips down her throat, turning her over and lying back, pulling her on top of him, her dressing gown coming away completely. She licked her way up his chest, covering his mouth with hers again as he held her to him, running his hands down her silky back, feeling her soft, damp hair cascade around him.

Merely sleeping in the same bed with Ginny had been both wonderful and torturous during the holiday; now the torture was over as she removed his pajama trousers for him and they touched each other as they'd wanted to during the previous five nights. Still, Harry was mindful of the fact that four of her brothers were in the house with them, and that Ron had extraordinarily acute hearing. When he wanted to cry out, he clamped his mouth shut, and when Ginny's whimpers grew ever louder, Harry pulled her mouth to his, swallowing her cries before she went limp and collapsed, a glazed look in her eyes.

He pulled the sheet and blanket over their bodies, still entwined, feeling that everything had finally come round right in his life — almost. He framed her face between his hands and stared into her dark eyes, unable to remember how he had stayed away from her for as long as he had. And then he remembered that he hadn't — not really. He'd been unable to resist meeting her on top of the Astronomy Tower, flying with her, kissing her and declaring his love, even though she had still been with Malfoy...

A sudden rush of sympathy for Draco Malfoy washed over him; he would never know this connection with her. Malfoy cared about Mariah, but Harry remembered well what it was like to sleep with Hermione, his friend whom he cared about and would defend to the death — but still, he hadn't been in love with her. That something extra was missing. Whom did Draco Malfoy see if he were to hold the amulet now? Did he see Mariah, or did he still see Ginny? And how on earth were they ever to get his help in getting rid of Voldemort, especially while he was full of hatred for Harry and love for Ginny?

For that matter, what could Ginny do to help? His throat constricted for a moment as he remembered what his mother had done, and he held Ginny more tightly, suddenly having trouble breathing as he remembered, in his other life, getting the letter from his stepfather telling him that Ginny had been killed...

Ginny put her cheek on his chest and whispered, "What are you thinking about?"

Harry hesitated. "The Prophecy", he said, somewhat truthfully. "Voldemort. All that. Us. How — wondering how —"

"Sssh", she hushed him. "I talked to Maggie about this. She said that Prophecies are tricky things. Think about the one she gave at Fraserburgh. Now, that took less time to be fulfilled than the one she gave when she was a little girl, but even if you'd worked out that 'when the night and day must needs agree' meant the vernal equinox, you couldn't have known that finding the dementors' 'berth' would mean working out how to send them into Limbo, or that they would be at Stonehenge to begin..."

Harry started to sit up, so Ginny had to roll off him; she pulled herself into a sitting position while Harry digested her words, his head feeling like it was going to explode. "Hang on — *what* prophecy she gave when she was a little girl?" But even as he asked, he had a strange feeling that he knew the answer. *It wasn't Trelawney*. "Do you mean — Maggie gave *the* Prophecy? The one *we're* in? And Malfoy?"

She nodded. "I — I thought you knew", she whispered. "My — my dad was the one who told Professor Dumbledore it was Trelawney, all those years ago. They both wanted to protect Maggie, so no one would know she'd done it. Dad and Professor Trelawney, that is. I thought Sirius would have told you, since he was the Lion in the first triangle —"

"What?" Harry exploded, heedless of noise now. "*Sirius?* I — I always assumed — assumed that it was my dad —"

She shook her head. "No. When Peter Pettigrew was still in custody and was talking, he and Sirius had a long talk about the first triangle... Pettigrew was the first Moon Child. His birthday is the twenty-eighth of June. See, evidently Professor Snape was worried that *he* was the Moon Child. His birthday is the ninth of July, which also fits the Arithmancy numbers. Sirius told him that it was actually Pettigrew, that You-Know-Who himself knew this, and that he knew Sirius was the Lion. It was Sirius who made the decision to change the Secret Keeper", she whispered, looking down and away from him.

"It wasn't Sirius' fault that my parents were killed!" he said hotly, although his chest hitched when he thought of this. *Wasn't it?* said a voice inside him. *Wasn't it his fault that Wormtail knew where they were and could tell Voldemort?* The beating of his heart was like someone punching him repeatedly in the chest. He remembered seeing Sirius in his sister's bedroom with his mother, his rage making the door hit the wall...

"No, it wasn't", she agreed, not knowing what he was thinking. "But he *contributed* to the fall of You-Know-Who, in his way, just as your mother did, by sacrificing herself. And — and in his way, Peter Pettigrew contributed as well..."

"No! He's a traitor and a murderer!" Harry cried angrily.

Ginny put her hand on his cheek. "Yes, he's that *too*", she said softly. "But — but all three people in the triangle did *something*..."

Harry swallowed. "Yeah, well I don't see what Draco Malfoy could possible contribute apart from being an insufferable prat. The last time I checked, that quality wasn't known for felling Dark Lords", he said bitterly. Ginny swallowed and sat back on her haunches.

"Neither is being a stupid little girl who lets herself be controlled by an enchanted diary", she said softly. He quickly took her hands, starting to speak, but she pulled one hand away and put it over his mouth. "No; you don't have to say anything. I know you love me, Harry. But I also know you think I'm useless for this..."

"No!" he insisted, pulling her to him. She shook her head.

"I'm not an Auror like your mum was, and I don't have a child I can die for, but who knows? Maybe by the time we — we fulfill the Prophecy —"

"No!" he said again, his hands tightening on her back as he whispered into her neck; "you are not going to die! Not if I have something say about it!"

She pulled back from him, and the look in her eyes frightened him more than anything he'd ever seen. "You might not *have* anything to say about it, Harry", she whispered. "It was your mum's sacrifice that did the trick last time... Ever since I found out that I'm the Daughter of War, I've — I've been thinking about this — about what I'm willing to do —"

He gasped. "No, Ginny! You — you haven't been thinking you have to *die*, have you?"

She drew her lips into a line and looked away from him. "How could I not think about it?" she said so quietly he could barely hear her. She faced him again, her eyes full of tears. "None of us know what we'll be called on to do. I just — I just want to *be* with you until we — we find out —"

She lunged forward and kissed him suddenly, hungrily, with a desperation that he knew was born of her fatalistic thinking. She continued to cry as they kissed, and he could taste her salt tears running into their mouths. He gathered her to him, rolling her over beneath him; her hair was dry now, and it was like a cloud of fire around her head; he moved his mouth down her throat, trying not to cry himself.

"You're not going to die, Ginny", he whispered as his lips moved over her flushed skin, but even as he said it, he wondered whether he believed it. *She died young in that other world; who's to say she's not meant to die young in this one, too? And if Voldemort falls —*

"You're not going to die, Ginny", he repeated loudly, trying to still the voice in his brain. He moved up to kiss her mouth, but he had the feeling, as they brought their bodies together again in a denial of death, that neither one of them completely believed it. Afterward, he gathered her to him, holding her as close to him as he could without being joined to her again, feeling every breath she took, her ribs beneath his fingers, while they both lay very still, staring at the moonlight moving over the ceiling. Finally, they both dropped off to sleep close to dawn, having beaten back real death for the night, but no longer able to stave off the temporary one.

* * *

He passed through the gates to Hogwarts, pausing for a moment to look at the statues of winged boars at the top of the gateposts. It seemed to be taking him a very long time to reach the castle; he continued to put one foot in front of the other, and still, he seemed to be no closer than when he started...

He could see that someone was waiting for him on the front steps of the castle, but he was too far away to see who it was. Then suddenly, everything seemed to speed up. With no effort or movement on his part, the castle seemed to be rushing at him, and he looked up, dizzy, to see his sister standing on the steps, smiling down at him.

She looked as he remembered her, the dark hair curling slightly on her shoulders, glinting red where the light hit it. Her large green eyes were exactly like his mother's, but the freckles on her nose were all her own. She was wearing Hogwarts robes and smiling at him, making his heart turn over.

"Hello, Harry."

He wanted to run toward her and hug her tightly, she seemed so real, but suddenly, she changed. That's all he knew; he couldn't tell exactly HOW she changed. He was reminded of Fleur transforming into a frightful creature of vengeance at the wedding, but Jamie didn't look anything like a veela. And yet, still, he knew she was his sister...

"Jamie!"

"Harry!"

Harry sat bolt upright, his heart going very fast. The sun already seemed to be quite high in the sky. He checked his watch; it was after ten o'clock, and he groaned. "We should probably get up." Seeing Ginny lying beside him with nothing on, however, the dream receded from his consciousness and he started to lean over her, a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. "Unless you'd like to spend some more time in bed, that is..."

Ginny stayed on her back, looking at him incredulously. "Yes, because that's exactly what every girl wants to do after hearing her boyfriend wake up calling his sister's name."

He pulled back, struggling to remember the dream; it was more difficult than he felt it should have been, as though a memory charm had

been put on him. "That's right — Jamie — I was dreaming —"

"Mm hm", Ginny said, fishing around amongst the sheets for her dressing gown.

"No, really — it was weird, though. I don't think it was really her; she *changed*."

Ginny stopped. "Changed how?"

He told her what he could remember about his dream while she put on the dressing gown and tied the belt. She stared into space, thinking. "Well, I don't remember Trelawney or my sister saying anything about how to interpret dreams like that... are you sure you're not still thinking about Cho? Did Jamie change into a giant eagle?"

He shook his head. "No, that wasn't it." He sighed and closed his eyes, trying to think. "I'm not sure what it meant..."

Ginny leaned over to kiss him on the forehead, just next to his scar. "I'm sorry I was a bit snippy. I'm — well, frankly, I'm often a little out-of-sorts in the morning —"

He grinned at her. "Yeah, I've noticed that when you come down to the common room to warm up for running."

She made a face, her hand on the doorknob. "You don't know how long I resisted getting up early to run in the mornings. I'll be right back; going to the loo."

He heard Hermione's voice as she passed his door, which made him think of Ron. He suddenly realized that they could have a small problem on their hands unless something was done, and he ran to the door, looking for Hermione in the corridor; she was fully dressed, waiting outside the bathroom for Ginny to finish. When he hissed at her she gaped at him in his pajama trousers.

"Well, look at the lie-abed! Thought you'd join the waking world, finally?"

"I have to talk to you!" he whispered urgently. "Get in here!"

She frowned at his rudeness, but he didn't feel he had time to worry about social niceties, pulling her into the room when she was about three feet away still and closing the door abruptly. She put her fists on her hips and demanded, "What's going on?"

"Where's Ron?"

"In the garden, doing kata. *Some* people have been up for a while. What's *wrong* with you, Harry?"

"Well, Ginny said you helped her with something on her first night here — well, it's been about five days, and she doesn't need that sort of 'help' anymore, so last night we — erm —"

"Ooooh", she breathed slowly. "And you're worried Ron will get wind of it."

"Literally."

She grinned. "I have just the spell. It will deaden his olfactory nerves — his sense of smell. He won't detect a thing."

"You're sure? What if it doesn't have an effect on werewolves?"

She shrugged. "I'll make it strong enough that he wouldn't be able to smell Fang if he was standing one foot behind him. Trust me. I'll take care of it."

"Thanks. Because I really could have done without his trying to take my head off at dinner a few weeks back when Maggie let us into her rooms for the afternoon..."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "He wouldn't speak to me for three days because I gave him detention for that. What did he think I would do? I'm Head Girl, and he'd just attacked the Head Boy with a bowl of mashed potatoes."

Harry grimaced. "Not that his having detention did much for my dignity. Malfoy loved that, seeing old Potty having to walk out of the Great Hall with mashed-potato hair."

She looked like she was trying not to laugh. "Ron's trying to be mature about this, he is. I think it would be easier for him if he didn't have to think about it, like his brothers, but because he's a werewolf and can *detect* certain things, he feels like he has no choice but to think about it. So I'll just help him along a little with the not-thinking-about-it."

He pulled her to him in a hug. "You're a lifesaver, Hermione."

Ginny opened the door and looked at them with a raised eyebrow. Hermione pulled away from Harry and said, "I'll take care of it now", leaving quickly. Ginny closed the door after her and slowly walked to Harry.

"Take care of what?"

He pulled her to him in a long, slow kiss, while he untied her dressing gown and pushed it from her shoulders. He whispered in her ear what Hermione was going to do and Ginny laughed. "Oh, thank goodness! I — I

was worried about doing anything this morning in case — in case it would be too obvious to him — but now —"

Harry grinned at her and picked her up, carrying her to the bed.

* * *

Ron was convinced he had a head cold the rest of the time they spent at Hog's End because he was incapable of smelling *anything*. Hermione had very obligingly brewed him Pepper-Up Potion, which had had no effect (she had assured Harry that this would be the case). When they'd been back at Hogwarts for a couple of days, she took the spell off him, and he declared that his cold had simply gone away on its own; his appetite increased again, as food hadn't held much interest for him while he hadn't been able to smell it.

Harry felt as though he'd been through far more than one year of schooling since September. He seemed to be constantly leaving the school and returning. As expected, Ron had them practice very hard all week leading up to the Quidditch Final against Slytherin. When Harry walked into the stadium at the start of the game, he noticed that Munro Kirkner was sitting with his sister. A number of girls in his vicinity were giving Munro very appreciative looks; he smiled ingratiatingly at them. When he wasn't looking (although he might still have been aware of it happening) this produced swoons.

Harry swallowed on seeing the Kirkners; there was still no word about their mother. He hadn't thought of them during the holiday, having been so caught up in being with Ginny, preparing for the match and doing N.E.W.T. revision. The Kirkner family problems had gone clean out of his brain. *But they're also my problems*, he reminded himself, aware of Draco Malfoy's pale head out of the corner of his eye. He remembered the cavalier way he'd stepped forward and blamed Harry for the loss of the dementors, dragons and various Death Eaters. *He doesn't need a bloody Obedience Charm to be Voldemort's lap dog*, Harry thought irritably, as Madam Hooch threw the Quaffle into the air.

Ron took the Quaffle immediately, zooming toward the Slytherin goals. Harry shot straight up, surveying the field from this lofty vantage point, watching for a glint of gold. Malfoy sped toward the Gryffindor goals, where Ginny was hovering, although she didn't have to work at the moment, as Ron had just scored twice on the Slytherin Keeper.

"TWENTY TO NOTHING, GRYFFINDOR!" Seamus Finnegan cried.

A Bludger rushed at Harry and he dropped down about fifteen feet, unpleasantly reminded of the rogue Bludger Bagman had sent after him. Unfortunately, another Bludger hit Ron's broom, sending him off course so that the Slytherin Keeper could throw the Quaffle to one of his team's Chasers, who immediately started down the pitch toward Ginny.

"And Ginny Weasley BLOCKS the attempt by SLYTHERIN!" Seamus yelled as Ginny hurled the Quaffle toward her brother, now weaving between the other players, leaping up to grab the red ball from the air, bring his broom around and head back toward the Slytherin goals. Harry excitedly followed, far above, adrenaline pumping through him as he enjoyed watching Ron play. The Quaffle sailed through the far left Slytherin goal and Harry couldn't help thinking that this might be Ron's last game of competitive Quidditch. Ron still didn't know what he wanted to do after finishing school; he thought he'd known what he wanted to do back when he'd been playing Quidditch for England, but now...

"AND WEASLEY SCORES AGAIN! NOW IT'S FORTY TO NOTHING, GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry grinned at Ron and swooped around the edge of the pitch again, trying to avoid the other players and the Bludgers. Twice Slytherin tried to score on Ginny, and on the third try one of them finally made it. However, Ron had also been busy, so they were up by fifty points. Harry scanned the field again, trying not to be distracted by reflections from wristwatches or eyeglasses. Draco Malfoy always seemed to be at the opposite end of the field, as though avoiding him. This was odd, as Malfoy's usual *modus operandi* was to tail Harry, leaving it up to him to find the Snitch and then trying to beat him to it. As this had never worked for him, Harry didn't really blame him for changing his strategy.

Finally, Harry saw it. He tried not to look like he was going anywhere in particular, keeping an eye on Malfoy, who was again hovering near Ginny, his mouth moving. Harry wished he knew what he was saying to her, but there was no time to think. He made a sharp dive, hoping Malfoy would think it just a feint, and when he pulled out of the dive he was holding the Snitch over his head, a triumphant grin on his face. The team rushed him and the screaming and hugging started. When they had all landed and were going round, embracing each teammate in turn, Harry finally reached Ginny, who slid her arms up around his neck with no

hesitation, kissing him deeply, while the rest of Gryffindor House raised Ron, the team captain, to their shoulders, carrying him back to the castle.

Harry and Ginny grinned at each other and followed the crowd at a more leisurely pace, their arms around each other's shoulders. When they were about halfway up the lawn, however, Harry felt the hairs standing up on the back of his neck; he turned to see Draco Malfoy standing by himself in the middle of the pitch, glaring at him. Harry turned to face forward again, but he couldn't prevent a strange shiver from passing through him, nor could he stop seeing the pale, pointed face, much as he tried.

* * *

Harry couldn't believe it; in the middle of the celebration, there Hermione sat, doing revision. He left Ginny, Ron and Tony, who were in the midst of the merriment, to stride over to where she sat by the windows, bringing her a bottle of butterbeer.

"You're not *serious*, Hermione. We've won the Quidditch Cup! Come join the party. You're the captain's girlfriend; Ron's wanted this since first year! Hey — hang on a minute", he said suddenly, noticing the book she was reading. "Isn't that *my* book?"

"Yes. Sorry. I asked Ron to 'borrow' it from you so I could read through it, just to play it safe. You can't be too careful with N.E.W.T.s. After all, I've decided to sit for the Ancient Runes N.E.W.T., which is very tricky, and this book is *full* of runes..."

"Well, I don't think you want to mess about with that book. Remember what happened to me and Ron when we tried one little spell? Turned Sandy into the image of my sister and had everyone in the school thinking we were sneaking strange girls into the castle..."

She laughed. "I'd forgotten about that."

"*I haven't*," Sandy said.

"*I didn't ask you*," he hissed at her.

"*I know*," Sandy responded calmly.

"Anyway", Hermione said, her attention back on the book, "I wasn't able to read a lot of it. That spell you used was Latin, and it was also given in Greek and medieval French or Italian, or it might be Provençal — but some are in languages I don't recognize at *all*..."

Harry moved around the table and bent over the book with her as she turned the pages. He stopped her after a few pages, recognizing something

from his other life, from his visit to Rabbi Pelta's synagogue. "Isn't this Hebrew?" he said, running his finger along the page. However, alongside the column of blocky letters was some flowing script, and next to that, a column of strange symbols that seemed to be made from very small triangles.

"That looks like cuneiform!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Like *what*?" Harry frowned.

"Cuneiform. It was a very early writing method — possibly the first one, apart from using simple slashes for counting things. Small triangular pieces of wood were pressed into soft clay and the clay was dried. This must be a *very* old spell. I wish I could read it..."

"Well, I know who we can ask about the Hebrew", Harry said, striding across the room to where Ruth was perched on Tony's lap, her arm around his shoulders. "Tony!" he exclaimed. "Fantastic game. Listen, can I borrow Ruth for a minute?"

A minute later, all three of them were bent over the book while Ruth frowned over the words Harry had thought were Hebrew. "It's not", Ruth informed them in a dreamy voice, as she gazed at the yellowed page. "It's Aramaic."

"It is?" This seemed to excited Hermione. "I wish we learned about Aramaic in Ancient Runes! After all, it's the language that —" She glanced at Harry, biting her lip.

"Right", Ruth said, continuing to run her finger down the page, muttering something under her breath. "I learned it from my mum. She teaches it at university. Ancient Near Eastern languages." She stared some more at the columns of text. "I think the way these are laid out, they're meant to be like a Rosetta stone. The same thing is in each column, very likely, but in a different language. I only read a little Arabic, and this isn't modern Arabic, but as far as I can tell, it says the same as the Aramaic..."

And then, to Harry's surprise, she muttered something like *abracadabra* and gasped.

"What? What?"

Ruth looked at Harry and Hermione. "It's a very ancient spell that was created at the same time as — as the Killing Curse. It's — it's meant to maintain balance..."

"Balance? How do you mean?" Hermione wanted to know.

She tapped the page with her finger. "It's a resurrection spell. That's why it's done with a snake, the ancient symbol of immortality. It's to bring the dead back to life."

Hermione scowled. "There's no such thing. Dead is dead."

Ruth raised her eyebrows. "I didn't say I believed it — I'm just telling you what it says. Okay, to be technical, it's not a resurrection spell. It's — a way to petition the gods —"

"Petition the gods?" Harry squeaked. "Wha —?"

"It has to do with the beginning of the world. From what I can make out in both the Aramaic and Arabic versions, they've each got phonetic spellings of the words of the spell. The first two look like *Enuma Elish* in each column. That's the name of the Babylonian creation epic. It means *in the beginning*."

"Sounds familiar", Hermione said tentatively.

Ruth smiled at her. "Don't worry about offending me. My parents are rabbis, but they're also academics. They're both well aware of the various creation stories that merged and converged over time in the Near East. *Most* creation myths start with *in the beginning*." She pointed at the book. "That's followed by the names of their chief creation gods to invoke them: Tiamat and Apsu, which means 'abyss'."

"So", Hermione said a little smugly. "It's *not* a resurrection spell."

"No, I'm sorry. I misspoke. According to this, when someone's killed prematurely, the world is thrown into imbalance. With this you can petition the gods to bring them back."

Harry felt like he couldn't breathe. *If something happened to Ginny, maybe* — "How do you do it?" he said quickly. He ignored Hermione's glare.

Ruth didn't notice Hermione's expression but bent over the text, explaining the theory to him. When she straightened up, she whistled. "That's some powerful magic. You don't want to go invoking mystical realms at the drop of a hat, I think..."

Harry looked grimly at the page; a wood block print showed an enormous snake curled around a wizard, the snake's tail in its mouth. The wizard had his wand raised. "No, not at the drop of a hat. But to get rid of dementors, or a Grindelwald —"

"Harry!" Hermione said sharply. "Are you forgetting that Professor Snape's grandparents were sucked into Limbo? And Bagman will never be

brought to justice now, either. This is dangerous stuff. I don't care if you are a Parselmouth and — and everything else. You already tried to save your mu —" She stopped abruptly and clamped her mouth shut.

"Don't do it", Ruth said quickly, her voice very tense.

Harry peered at her, remembering sitting next to her at the piano at her parents' house, learning the Kaddish. "Why?"

"Even though the spell was created to maintain balance, to counter the Killing Curse, who decides who should live and die? Only God", she said softly, almost inaudibly.

"What if someone has already played God by killing someone else? What then?"

"Then that person was meant to die", she whispered, unable to look at him.

"No!" he said, more loudly than he'd intended. Luckily the party was very, very noisy. He lowered his voice. "I don't think that's always true. Sometimes, but not —"

"*No other gods*", she hissed under her breath. Harry stared at her.

"What?"

"Listen — do you think it's been easy for me to be a student here? You may not have noticed, but Hogwarts holidays don't coincide with the Jewish calendar, the food isn't even close to Kosher, and it's next to impossible to be idle on a Saturday. But I *do* try to make sure I don't pursue other gods. This spell — I don't know what, if anything, you believe in, Harry. But it's not funny to call on gods. I don't recommend it."

"Gods? You mean — you believe there are other —"

"Of *course* there are `other'. Why else would there need to be a Commandment against following them? In this case, it's not a matter of believe or not believing — it's a matter of allegiance. Gods demand attention; you stir one up, and you don't know what that will mean. And if you want a favor from a god? That means sacrifice. You don't get something for nothing. This is *not* something you want to mess about with."

Giving him a fearful look, she crossed the room and returned to Tony. Hermione bit her lip, regarding Harry with trepidation. "I think she's right, Harry", she said softly.

He nodded. "I know you do." He stared at the page again. Something about the spell was familiar..."Hermione! That book I read in the library,

in fifth year — the one about the other Voldemort — this is the spell he used to try to get his son back!"

She frowned at the page. "Are you sure?"

"I remember now! And — and he lived after that —" he added tentatively.

"But did he actually succeed?"

Harry stared at the book again. "I don't remember. I think — I think it didn't really say."

They looked at the book for another minute, Harry tracing the illustration with his finger. Suddenly Hermione said, "Oh, did you hear? Professor Snape is giving us a supply of Mandrake Munchies to carry during the practical N.E.W.T.s, in case of mishaps. Last year Madam Pomfrey was swamped with patients after the practical exams; so many people had hexed each other, and they had to be put right again before continuing to take their tests. Now that the twins have developed a sweet that's impregnated with a Mandrake draught, all you have to do is pop one into your mouth, chew and swallow, and no more hex! They *really* should have received more O.W.L.s, don't you think?"

Harry shrugged. "I just hope Padma Patil has done a raft of revision, like you have. I can't believe I got her for my partner."

"Only because there are so few girls in our year in Gryffindor. Padma should do fine; she's not *my* favorite person, as she helped Parvati pull that incredibly stupid *stunt* which could have ended up with her *dea*—, erm, hurt even worse than she was", Hermione stuttered. "But she's a good student, and a Ravenclaw. You'll be fine. We've spent a lot of time doing revision, you're the captain of the Dueling Club. You can control *dragons*, for heaven's sake. You'll be fine, Harry."

He sighed. "I hope you're right. I am *not* looking forward to those Sun Bulls."

She shook her head. "Nor am I, and I don't even have to handle them personally. Ron should be fine, though, with his werewolf strength and all. They won't know what hit them." He nodded; Ron would definitely have an advantage.

"So", she said, nodding at the book. "No playing God?" she said hopefully. He looked over at Ron and swallowed. Easy for her to say; her boyfriend was virtually impossible to kill. Ginny had already almost died because of Tom Riddle when she was a first year.

He didn't answer but slammed the book shut and carried it up to his dormitory. *Playing God*. Who did that more than Voldemort? He stared at the book before returning it to his trunk. *I did it, too*, he thought. *I created a new world*. Was that playing God? *Probably*. But he'd balanced it out, he'd fixed it. *He'd played God again*.

But it was a mistake, and needed to be fixed! he thought irritably.

Who decides what is a mistake and what is not?

He felt like his head was splitting in two, and he curled up in his four-poster, trying to shut out the doubts, but his dreams were no help; he had the dream again about his sister, and when he awoke in a cold sweat, the morning sunshine was streaming in the window and bathing the room in a golden glow.

* * *

Now that the Quidditch Final was history, Harry felt as though the end of the term was approaching with alarming speed. In late May, he and Hermione spent three nights with Ron during the full moon, and before they knew it, June was upon them. Then were to take their written N.E.W.T.s during the first week and their practical tests during the second week. The day before they were to start their practical tests, Remus Lupin entered the Great Hall during breakfast, carrying three large packages, which he placed before Harry, Ron and Hermione.

"Hello!" he said. "I come bearing presents. How are the N.E.W.T.s coming along?"

"We're half done", Hermione told him. "We did written exams last week with Ravenclaw, while Hufflepuff and Slytherin did the practicals. This week we do the practicals."

Remus nodded. "I know." He nodded at the packages. "Don't open them just yet. Are you finished your breakfasts? I came to see Sirius about a thing or two; why don't you bring them up to his rooms and you can open them somewhere comfortable."

Harry frowned at his. "Who're they from?"

Ron poked his package, which had writing on it. "Don't you recognize my mum's handwriting Harry?" he said, grinning. "I think they're N.E.W.T. presents."

"Ooh!" Hermione said, rattling her package a little, but getting no noise but crinkling paper. Harry looked up at the head table; Sirius nodded

to them and soon the five of them, plus Ginny, were walking up the stairs to the staff wing.

Once they were in Sirius' sitting room, Remus encouraged them to open the packages, grinning at Sirius. Harry unfolded a piece of parchment that was tucked into the string wrapping the brown paper, a warm feeling blossoming inside him.

Dear Harry,

As you prepare to take your practical N.E.W.T.s, please accept this gift. The boots will be the best thing to wear on your feet when you are using the plow and bulls, the breeches and cloak are enchanted to prevent sharp objects from penetrating, such as horns, and the shirt is simply loose and comfortable. The cloak should fit over your robes.

I made everything myself, casting the protective spells as I went. I know you will do well, but it can't hurt to have every little advantage. I couldn't be more proud of you if you were my own son. If Ron starts to get down at the mouth as the tests approach, please remind him how much we love him and try to cheer him up. Remus also has some good news for him.

Give Ginny a hug for me.

Affectionately,

Molly Weasley

Harry opened the package, finding the clothes Mrs. Weasley had described in her letter. He looked up to see Ron reading his letter; he ran his hand through his hair, making the white lock of hair bounce over his brow. After folding the parchment into a very small square, he grimly opened the package and found clothes just like Harry's, only bigger. Hermione was exclaiming over her new cloak and boots as well.

Harry had been dreading the written tests, but they'd gone far better than he'd hoped. He'd been rather confident about the practical N.E.W.T.s, but now something seemed to have crawled into his stomach and was squirming around restlessly, as though trying to escape. He and Ron smiled weakly at each other while Hermione beamed.

Trying to sound more confident than he felt, Harry said, "Well, we're all set then, I reckon? With these and the Mandrake Munchies, we should have no problems, right?"

"Right", Ron said in a strangled voice, running one hand over his new knee-high boots.

Harry smiled at Ginny and gave her a one-armed hug, whispering to her, "From your mum." She nodded and put her head on his shoulder.

"You'll do fine", she whispered; he could tell she understood how he was feeling.

Remus sat in a chair adjacent to the couch where Ron and Hermione sat, looking rather grim. "Now, Ron, I want you to take your tests very seriously. They're very important. Ah, ah", he said, putting up his hand to stop Ron's protest, which died on his lips. "I know you think it doesn't matter how well you do, but you have to show a certain level of competence in your N.E.W.T.s if you're going to come work for me at the Ministry."

Ron's jaw dropped. "Work — work for *you*?" He grinned as though Christmas had come early. "You're joking, right?"

Remus laughed. "Not a bit of it. Now, you know I've been working as an operative for Dumbledore for the last few years, right? In spite of being a werewolf, not being able to Apparate, all that. That hasn't stopped me, now has it?" He raised an eyebrow at Ron.

"No, I reckon it hasn't", Ron admitted. "But —"

Remus put his hand up again. "Now, it's true, some rules were bent for me at the Ministry. But largely what they did was get rid of some antiquated rules that had no bearing on whether someone could do the job I'm doing. It's not quite the job of an Auror, but I do engage in covert work of a dangerous nature. Come to think of it, I'm not even certain that would interest you at —"

"When would I start?" Ron said excitedly. Harry saw the red glint in his eyes.

Remus laughed. "Well, you might want a little holiday after finishing school. Let's say — September? If you're really anxious, you can start training in August."

Ron turned to Hermione, grinning. Harry felt genuinely happy for Ron, who hadn't had anything this good happen to him since finding out he was going to play Quidditch for England. Hermione looked at Remus. "You

wouldn't know whether anyone at the Ministry is going to respond to my letters before I finish my seventh year?"

"What letters?" Ron asked, frowning. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"You didn't think I was going to wait until I was out of school to look for a job, did you? I sent letters to a number of departments *months* ago, with letters of recommendation from Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, Dumbledore and Snape."

"And from me", Remus added, smiling. "And yes, Hermione, I happen to know that you should soon be hearing from *all* of the departments with which you enquired — but don't jump at the first letter you get. You might want to wait for the one from a certain rather secretive department —"

She was bouncing up and down in her seat, eyes round with excitement. "No! You're kidding! The — the Department of Mysteries?"

Remus nodded, clearly enjoying seeing her excitement. Ron gaped at her.

"Are — are you going to be an Unspeakable?" he said in awe.

She looked very pleased with herself. "Maybe", she said coyly.

Harry sighed. "It's a good thing I have plenty of gold in my vault, I reckon..."

"What?" Remus said. "To keep all of the other gold company that you're going to make as a professional Quidditch player?"

"A — a what?"

"Well, I happen to know that Owen Aberystwyth is interested in having you back on the Welsh team, and I heard that a number of scouts from league teams were at the Quidditch Final, hunting for prospects. You should be hearing from some people soon."

Harry reflected on that for a moment while Ginny hugged him excitedly. "I reckon I could do that", he said slowly. "After all, my dad was a Quidditch player. Of course", he added, "my mum was an Auror..." Now where had that come from? he wondered.

Ginny was looking at him rather anxiously now. "Is that something that might interest you, Harry?" Remus asked. "Because I don't think you'd be turned away. You'd have to take the qualifying exams to be admitted to training, of course."

Ron brightened. "If you worked at the Ministry too, Harry, all three of us might be doing things together again! That'd be brilliant!"

Harry suspected that he was just feeling jealous that Harry had the chance to play Quidditch, while he did not, but Harry smiled and nodded. "Yeah, that would", he agreed.

First, however, the three of them needed to get through the rest of his N.E.W.T.s. That evening, Padma met him to give him the potions she'd brewed. He put the vials on the table next to his bed, turning to look at them frequently in the night; he kept waking up, his mind too restless to stay asleep. Once, when he awoke, he vaguely remembered having the dream about his sister again, but he still couldn't pin down how she had changed. Another time, he was facing his mother in a huge hall with enormous columns holding up a ceiling that disappeared into blackness. She stood before him like a queen while he felt insignificant and unworthy. And that was *before* he looked down, realized that he was naked, and woke with a start, his heart going very fast.

In the morning, after showering, Harry applied the topical potion to his entire body, followed by drinking the draught of Eutharsos Potion Padma had also made. He remembered the way he'd felt the first time he'd had it, the way he'd felt his body go numb, bit by bit, followed by a wakefulness creeping through him, an alertness and clarity of vision that made it easy to understand how Neville had become addicted to the stuff.

He glanced at Neville now, staring for a moment at the vial of potion before finally tipping back his head and drinking. He looked at Ron and nodded at Neville; Dean and Seamus saw this as well. They'd already discussed this, the four of them; they were going to keep a close watch on Neville, to make sure he was all right, that he didn't weaken and try to take more of the potion after the tests were over. Neville looked up and met Harry's eye, perhaps knowing what they were thinking.

"All right, Harry?" he said quietly. Harry smiled at him.

"All right, Neville."

Harry breathed deeply, his skin prickling on his scalp, feeling very strong and daring. He wondered whether Ron would have felt like this without help, and thought that it was quite possible the Chthonians wouldn't know what hit them when they started fighting Ron. They dressed in the clothes Mrs. Weasley had sent them and set off for breakfast.

For some reason, Ginny wasn't at the Gryffindor table for the meal; Harry asked Ruth where she was, but to his surprise, she turned deep red and stuttered, "She left the dormitory early, said she had to meet someone

to talk..." Harry frowned, but then he looked up and saw an empty place at the Slytherin table. *Malfoy*. Mariah was next to Blaise Zabini, with Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott nearby. But no Malfoy anywhere in sight.

Harry mentioned this to Ron as they left the Great Hall; Ron hesitated for a moment, then said, "We're supposed to be down in the paddock in five minutes, Harry. Ginny said she'd come to watch me, since I'm up first. She — she won't miss this — will she?" he added uncertainly. Harry looked nervously at the mass of students moving past them.

"I don't know", he said truthfully. "What if Malfoy's hurt her?"

"Here's Snape and Maggie — they'll find her. Come on, I don't want you to miss it, either."

They waylaid Snape and Maggie, pulling them aside from the throng of bodies to tell them about Ginny and Malfoy being missing; they both nodded, and Maggie said, "I can feel her presence, nearby. She's — she's upset, but not frightened. And I don't think she's in danger..." she said, closing her eyes and massaging her temples with her fingers.

"All right, then", Ron said. "You find her and get her down to the pitch. Oh, and I want you there, too!" he grinned, hugging his older sister. "Too bad Nita isn't here —"

"Who says she isn't here?" said a crisp voice behind them. Ron turned and smiled at his oldest sister, who was flanked by Fred, George, Percy and Angelina.

"Brilliant! You took the day off!"

She shrugged. "It's not every day you get to see a werewolf take his practical N.E.W.T.s", she said, her blue eyes glinting mischievously.

Maggie greeted her siblings. "Yes, well, first we have to find Ginny. I can tell she's somewhere in the castle, the problem is where —"

Harry struck his head. "How stupid of me!" He leaned in toward Fred, whispering, "Go to my dormitory and get the map out of my trunk."

Fred nodded. "Right. Only —"

"Oh, right." Harry whispered the current Gryffindor password to him and he bolted up the marble stairs. With Fred, Maggie, Nita and Snape looking for Ginny, the others accompanied Harry, Ron and Hermione to the paddock where the Sun Bulls were waiting.

"Mum is taking care of the babies", George informed them, "and Bill and Charlie couldn't get away, unfortunately. Neither could dad."

"Dad? Oh, rotten luck", Ron said frowning as he walked.

"What's wrong with us?" Percy said, clearly hurt. "Katie would have liked to be here too, but only one of us could beg off work."

Harry grinned at him. "I'm glad the pair of you are so happy", he said, only loud enough for Percy to hear. Percy nodded at him and clapped his hand on Harry's shoulder; because of the potion, he barely felt a thing. There seemed to be a protective barrier between him and the rest of the world; it was a strange sensation.

They all stood outside the paddock, waiting for Hagrid to bring out the Sun Bulls; Ron was opening and closing his fists, taking deep breaths, and Harry hoped Ginny would make it in time. When Hagrid finally brought the bulls through the gate on the far side of the paddock, everyone gasped at the awe-inspiring animals. Hagrid nodded to Ron and Ron waved his wand, yoking the bulls without touching them or the plow. As Ron approached them, Harry was suddenly aware out of the corner of his eye that something orange and black was moving on the deep green of the sloping Hogwarts lawn. He shaded his eyes, squinting against the sun, and saw that it was Ginny.

"Hold off, Ron", he called. "Ginny's on her way. Wait until she gets here." Ron nodded; he shaded his eyes, watching his sister run toward them breathlessly. "Yeah, all right. But when she gets close, I'm going to start. I've already got them yoked; I don't want to leave them standing for too long." The bulls were stamping and snorting nervously.

Harry nodded and watched Ginny approach them; Maggie, Snape and Fred were nowhere in sight. She seemed positively desperate, as though it were a matter of life and death to see them take their N.E.W.T.s. Harry frowned. Something about this bothered him. When she was about forty feet away, she called out breathlessly, "Stop him! Don't let him do it! It's a trap!" Her voice was very faint, since she was still so far away.

"What?" Harry and Hermione both said, hesitating for a second. But when they turned, they saw that Ron was listening to something Hagrid was telling him; he could have heard his sister easily if he had been paying any attention, but Hagrid had distracted him. He was about to put his hands on the handles of the plow. Ginny had caught up to Harry and Hermione, and now all three of them bolted forward to stop Ron from touching it. "No! Don't!" they all shouted, while he frowned at them, not understanding their problem. They had to scramble over the paddock fence and then run an additional thirty feet. Harry's heart was in his throat as he

ran, his arms pumping by his side. *If all of my running for the past three years is for anything, please let it help me save Ron now...*

He and the girls reached Ron almost simultaneously; He turned in surprise to see the three of them running toward him; they were too winded to talk and had to hope that they could physically restrain him from touching the plow. But Harry saw with wide eyes that he had put his right hand on the plow handle just as the three of them tackled him to the ground —

Too late.

The moment he touched the handle, the Portkey took them. Harry and Hermione had grabbed his left arm, and Ginny held onto Harry's other arm. Linked thus, they hurtled through space, their shoulders banging painfully. The plow didn't tickle either; it was large and bulky, although the bulls didn't seem to be in the mix; as they weren't physically touching the plow, they seemed to have been left out. It was just as well, as Harry thought that Ron's knee got him in the stomach at one point, making him gasp for breath. The hook behind Harry's navel pulled harder and harder, inexorably drawing him on.

At last, they tumbled to earth, lying in a jumble of arms and legs and plow on deep green grass, so that Harry wasn't entirely certain that they'd gone anywhere. Perhaps the Portkey hadn't worked. But when he staggered to his feet and looked around, and knew that they were far away from Hogwarts. And he knew exactly where they were.

The cottage was far more overgrown than the last time he'd seen it, and far more derelict. He remembered that, at the beginning of this sixth year, when Voldemort had failed (he thought) to convince Harry to save his mother, Dumbledore said he'd returned to Godric's Hollow and blasted the house in frustration. Harry could no longer see simple things like the sitting room mantel, the large chunk of stone that was the threshold. None of the remains rose higher than a couple of feet off the ground. The dresser in the kitchen was gone, as well as the kitchen table with its tea service protected by the green growth.

He looked at the others, hoping they were all right. He called each of their names and they responded with groans. Ron rose to his feet, wincing, then swearing colorfully. He looked around suspiciously. "Bloody hell — is this part of the test?"

Hermione squinted at their surroundings. "No. Definitely not. Where on earth are we?"

Ginny looked at the overgrown cottage ruins. "You know, Hermione. We all do. From Harry's Pensieve. It's Godric's Hollow."

Harry's heart was running away with him. "Ginny — I'm going to change into a golden griffin and fly you away from here. I don't want you here..." He remembered his old dream of Ginny being with him at Godric's Hollow, and turning into a skeleton. "Ron, Hermione — I — I can Apparate back with brooms for you —"

"But I can Apparate, Harry", Hermione said, frowning.

"You want to leave Ron here on his own?" he said, nodding at his best friend. If *only* werewolves could Apparate, he thought not for the first or last time.

Ron bristled. "I can take care of myself, Harry."

"Yes, but we don't know why you were brought here. Which means — bugger! Which means none of us should probably leave, because you were probably brought here to be a hostage... We're all stuck."

He paced nervously, running his hand through his hair. Ginny put her hand on his arm to try to calm him. "We'll figure something out", she said, her voice shaking. "We've all got our wands, you and Hermione are Animagi and know how to Apparate, Ron's a werewolf, and I —" She trailed off. She had her wand. That was it. Harry began to wonder who was really meant to be the hostage.

He held her upper arms firmly and practically barked at her, "How did you know it was a trap? Why did you come running from the castle?" Her mouth moved noiselessly; she looked dreadfully guilty. Finally, he said the word for her: "*Malfoy*."

She nodded, her eyes moist. "He sent me an owl late last night, said he wanted to talk to me before I went to watch Ron. I wasn't convinced I should go —"

"But you did", he said grimly. She peered at him.

"Are you jealous?"

He tried to shake the feeling, with difficulty. "Ginny — I just — I don't trust *him*. With good reason. And you shouldn't either. What did he have to say?"

"Well, he was up on the Astronomy Tower. With his broom. I started right in on him when I saw that. Told him that it was very unsporting of

him, when he'd already done his practical N.E.W.T.s, to try to disrupt others' by pulling a stunt on his broomstick. I thought he was going to try to distract the bulls or something. He laughed at me and said that his days of pretending to be a dementor to distract someone were far behind him. He said he just wanted to make sure *I* was safe. That got me going; I started screaming at him, 'What did you do? Why would anyone down at the N.E.W.T. testing *not* be safe?' He wouldn't answer me, and I said, 'It's a trap, isn't it? Isn't it?' He climbed on his broom and said he had to go. He was expected elsewhere and there would be hell to pay if he didn't go. I — I didn't like that. The next thing I knew, he was gone, and I had a feeling he was going off to meet *him*."

Harry whispered, "Voldemort." She nodded.

"So I came running down to try to stop Ron. Oh, I'd never wished so hard that I was like you Harry, and could turn into a griffin! I could have reached you all so much faster..."

He held her tightly and stroked her hair, feeling her trembling against him. She had a gash on her cheek from traveling through space with the plow. "It's all right, Gin, it's all right. No one's here. Perhaps Malfoy actually did the right thing for once and when he went to meet Voldemort he did something to — to stop him, or distract him."

She pulled back from him and frowned. "You may think that *I'm* still too soft on him, but I think you're worse sometimes, Harry. He's *not* your best friend from your other life. He's a Death Eater, and I'll just bet that *he's* the one who enchanted the plow so that it would bring Ron here!" She scowled. "The next time I see him, he'd better be *dead*, or I'll kill him myself!"

"Now, now. Is that any way to talk about your former paramour?"

The cold, high voice cut straight to Harry's bones. He whirled and felt his knees tremble; Voldemort looked stronger than Harry had ever seen him, even stronger than when Harry had been initiated as a Death Eater in his other life, by a Voldemort who'd never been weakened. Clearly, in the time since he'd regained his body, he'd been doing things to strengthen himself, to move closer to immortality. Harry swallowed and looked in the eerie red eyes, then away. He remembered the hypnotic voice of the Voldemort in his other life. *Don't look in his eyes*, he thought. Next to him, Ginny was gazing, transfixed, and Harry saw that Ron and Hermione were also.

There was a sudden *popping* noise, but Harry was saying, "Don't look into his eyes!" He whirled Ginny to face him, and she blinked, as though waking from a long sleep. Then Harry heard a laugh, but it wasn't Voldemort's laugh. The *popping* noise had been Draco Malfoy Apparating into the space next to the dark wizard, carrying his broom still, smirking. He had heard what Harry said.

"Yes, that's why others have died", he drawled sarcastically. "They looked in his eyes. He's not a bloody basilisk, Potter, you *idiot*."

"I've killed a basilisk", Harry whispered menacingly.

Malfoy waved this off. "Yeah, yeah. We're so impressed."

"Oh, and did you think *we'd* be impressed, Malfoy?" Ron said now, bristling. "Impressed that you've thrown in your lot with *him*?"

Draco Malfoy surveyed Ron coolly. "I thought I told you after fourth year — I plan to be on the winning side. It's quite clear which side that's going to be. Sadly, Granger's brains seem to have been no help to her in figuring out such a simple thing..."

"Sometimes you have to do what you think is *right*!" Hermione screamed at him, lunging for him. Ron grabbed her arm and she struggled against him. "Sometimes being on the winning side isn't what's most *important*!" Then she saw Ron's face. "I mean — oh, you know what I mean, Malfoy!"

The blond boy laughed. "I always could get you to say things you didn't intend, Mudblood. That's right, Mudblood. Everybody hear that? What are you going to do about it? Scarhead? Weasel? *Mudblood mudblood mudblood*. I'll say it as much as I please. Soon it'll be an obsolete term anyway, after you're all gone from the wizarding world. There won't be a need for a word for people who don't exist." Now Ron was lunging toward him, and Hermione was trying to keep him in check.

"Silence", the dark wizard said, with a wave of his hand at Draco Malfoy, whose mouth was now gone, just as when Mrs. Figg had done the same thing to Harry on Privet Drive. "You were supposed to bring me the best friend. I'm starting to think you're just like your father, and can't get anything right." Draco Malfoy touched his face in horror.

Voldemort waved his hand casually once more and the four of them were suddenly bound hand and foot, their arms trapped by their sides. The cold laugh cut through the air again and they huddled close to each other; Harry searched the others' faces. They'd never been this close to Voldemort

before. He could see the girls trembling; Ron just looked angry and stubborn. Harry was glad that he and Ron had used the potions that were intended to help them on their tests; he knew he should have been frightened, but he wasn't. He looked balefully at Draco Malfoy, but could not read the expression in the other boy's eyes.

Potion. Something occurred to him, seeing Voldemort's unearthly visage. *How many spells were responsible for his looking this way, for his near-immortality? What if* — Harry's hand was inching toward his robe pocket; he fumbled with the cloth, trying to get his fingers through the slit, grunting slightly. That got Voldemort's attention.

"Potter! What are you doing there?"

Harry immediately withdrew his hand. "Nothing." His voice was unnaturally high. "Nothing at all."

Voldemort made a skeptical noise; looking bored, he said, "Accio!" He held out his hand as the contents of Harry's pocket flew out of his robes and toward the dark wizard, who caught the small drawstring bag with one hand. He looked at it critically for a moment before opening it and peering inside; when he saw the contents, he started laughing. "Sweets! You were trying to get at your sweets! Well, I'm sorry — there shall be no sweets for *you*, Harry Potter —"

Harry couldn't prevent the groan of disappointment that escaped his lips; he quickly clamped his mouth shut and stared at Voldemort, who eyed Harry suspiciously.

"That concerned about sweets, are you? Well, I think I'll just help myself to one —" He seemed to be looking at Harry very carefully, to gauge his reaction.

"No!" Harry cried. Voldemort stopped and squinted at Harry.

"What did you say to me?" The voice was very even and slow.

"Um, I mean —" he licked his lips nervously. "I — I changed my mind. Go ahead, eat one. Or more. A lot. Eat a lot if you like", he said very quickly.

Voldemort stopped and examined the sweet in his hand suspiciously now. "Hm. You *want* me to eat it? That can't be good. I believe I need someone to fill the role of royal taster..." he mused, looking back and forth between Ron, Hermione and Ginny, his gaze resting on Ginny. "Here, girl. You eat one and I'll see what it does to *you*."

"Um, no! Please don't! It's — it's poison!" Harry cried quickly.

"Poison, eh? Is that why you wanted me to eat a lot of it? You evidently don't understand, *Harry*;" he seemed to be enjoying himself a great deal; "It would take far more than a little poison to kill me at this point. *If* I could be killed at all. Still... if it *is* poison, how amusing it would be to give it to one of your companions here..."

Harry twisted his robes nervously, watching Voldemort come closer to Ginny with the unwrapped sweet. Harry tried to watch Draco Malfoy out of the corner of his eye; he looked like he wanted to lunge forward, although Harry wasn't sure what that meant. Ginny seemed unable to move, as though Voldemort had mesmerized her; he forced her mouth open and inserted the sweet, then pointed his wand at her. She seemed to be chewing and swallowing against her will. He stood very close to her, peering at her closely. The cut on her cheek was healing over and disappearing before their very eyes, until her skin was smooth and unblemished once more.

To Harry's horror, Voldemort was smiling. *No one should ever have to see that*, Harry thought. Voldemort was practically nose-to-nose with Harry now, making him flinch at his nearness. "I should have known", he said softly. "First you *didn't* want me to eat it, because it has healing properties and you wanted to save it for yourself. Then you knew I'd be suspicious of anything that you *wanted* me to eat, and that I'd probably give it to one of you, to test it." An evil grin stretched across his face. "But your amateur attempt to manipulate me hasn't worked. I know now that it heals, that it helps. Well, say goodbye to your little secret weapon, Harry Potter", he said smoothly, still smiling. "*I am the one who will be strengthened by these now...*"

He started unwrapping the Weasley Wizard Wheezes Mandrake Munchies. He popped each one into his mouth, chewing several at once, and Harry felt himself break out into a cold sweat, watching, trying to look anxious and disappointed instead of hopeful. *Chew them, chew them all, you old bastard...*

And chew he did, clearly enjoying the look of distress on Harry's face. One sweet after another went into his gash of a mouth, but to Harry's satisfaction, the mouth wasn't quite so gash-like anymore, and the red eyes had darkened noticeably. The flat, snake-like nose was now protruding from his visage, looking like a proper *human* nose again, and there were actual lips visible around the gnashing teeth. Hair slowly sprouted on the

previously bald head, hair that was a mixture of dark brown and grey. The five of them watched with fascination the metamorphosis that was occurring before them, and Harry wondered what would have happened if *he* had eaten one of the sweets, whether his scar would have disappeared; it had never occurred to him that this might happen if he ate anything made from Mandrakes. He glanced at Malfoy, his eyes open wide in shock as he stared at Voldemort. (He probably would have had his mouth open, too, if he'd still had one, Harry thought.)

When he had finished the last one, the Voldemort who stood before them was no longer the Voldemort Harry had seen when he had first emerged from the cauldron with his restored body. It was not the Voldemort who had initiated Harry in his other life. This Voldemort bore far more of a resemblance to an aging version of a boy Harry had met twice — once in the Chamber of Secrets, and once in the copse of trees standing just beyond his parents' former home, not fifty feet from where they were gathered.

He glanced at Ginny to see her reaction, but to his surprise, she was not recoiling in fear and disgust (he remembered belatedly the way she said Tom had terrorized her). She had a lopsided, ironic smile, and it appeared that she was trying not to laugh. Forcing her mouth into a more sober position, she surveyed the middle-aged wizard before her, his salt-and-pepper hair, his dark eyes and his familiar chiseled features.

Her eyes were still laughing, however, as she said to him, clearly and slowly, "Hello again, Tom."

Foundation

"Hello again, Tom."

Voldemort looked up at Ginny, clearly enraged. "*What* did you say to me, girl?"

"*Ginny!*" Harry hissed, wishing she hadn't said anything. While it was true that Voldemort now looked exactly as Tom Riddle probably would have if he'd allowed himself to age naturally, Harry didn't have any hope that the Mandrakes had removed any of Voldemort's malice and cunning, let alone his original store of magical power, which was considerable. He actually thought longingly of the spell Voldemort had put on Draco Malfoy, removing his mouth so that he couldn't speak. *Please, please keep quiet, Ginny...*

"Well", she said, her voice shaking, "technically we haven't met, but I met a version of you through your old diary. I do *feel* like I know you... *all* about you", she added, her voice still shaking, although less. Harry frowned at her; was there something Riddle had revealed to her that she hadn't told Harry? Or was she just bluffing? He couldn't believe that Ginny was just *talking* to him as though he were a *normal* person. He knew she had nerve, but —

"*Crucio!*"

Suddenly, she was writhing on the ground, still bound hand and foot, an unearthly scream ripped from her lungs. There had been no warning whatsoever. Sweat was pouring down Harry's brow as he struggled with his bonds, his heart in his throat as her screaming continued. All he could think was that he wished it was him instead of Ginny. He saw that Ron was also struggling with his bonds, more successfully than Harry. He'd broken them, and was merely holding his hands behind his back in a show of still being restrained. Harry shook his head at him.

"*Don't try anything right now, Ron*", he whispered, barely moving his lips. He could tell that Ron could hear him through Ginny's agony. "*He'd kill you without a thought.*"

His first instinct was to refuse to show Voldemort that his torturing Ginny had an effect on him, but this would not only have been the most difficult thing he'd ever had to do, if he could accomplish it at all, he

realized even as the sobs were punching their way out of him that even if he'd managed it, an impassive response might only make Voldemort strive even harder to get some reaction from him. Tears rolled down his face as he forced himself to stay focused on her. He wished she had learned the pain-blocking technique, but when they'd tried to do this in Dueling Club meetings, Neville, oddly enough, had been the only other student to accomplish the complete mind-body separation. Harry was starting to fear for her sanity when Riddle finally lifted his wand from her, breaking the link, and Harry wanted to go to his knees beside her and take her into his arms. She turned her head to look at Harry, her eyes wide and unseeing. *Oh, god, Ginny*, he thought; *please be all right...*

"Harry," she whispered; he let out a relieved sigh, quite against his will. Next to him, Hermione sobbed and Ron gave a relieved sigh.

"*I'm here, Ginny*", Harry said quietly to her, then looked up at Voldemort, his jaw set. However, he was distracted a moment later by seeing Draco Malfoy's face as he stood next to his master and a little behind. The effect that the spell had had on *him* was also clear. For the first time, Harry took hope.

"Please", Harry said to Voldemort, "let the three of them go. I'll — I'll do whatever you want. You wanted me anyway, didn't you? That's why Ron was supposed to be brought here by the Portkey, right? To lure me here? You've got me already. I'm here. Now let the others go back."

The cold, high laugh was like a blade being run up Harry's spine, but it did sound marginally more human now that the madman had had the Mandrake sweets. "And why should I do that, exactly? Especially when I never expected to have the great pleasure of making you watch me — in person, that is — torture your friends before killing all of you. It is true that I thought the werewolf to be a particularly good choice... my servant here pointed out that he cannot escape by Apparating *and* that many, many things can be done to him without proving fatal. Far more *suffering* can take place when you needn't worry about the victim dying..." Harry glared at Draco Malfoy now, whose face had changed again, into a mask of pure hatred, directed at Harry, Ron and Hermione. "But where are my manners? I should be more generous to my loyal servants, should I not?" Riddle said, with a strange lilt to his voice. He turned to Malfoy, who was still missing his mouth. His eyes went wide, faced again with his master. However, with a wave of his hand, Riddle had returned his mouth to him.

He gasped, then said in a raspy whisper, "Thank you, M'Lord..."

Riddle waved his hand again, but this time he was brushing away the gratitude. "It's nothing. Time for me to show my gratitude to *you*, as my loyal servant", he said, suddenly grasping Malfoy's arm and pushing up his sleeve so he could press the tip of his wand to the Dark Mark on his left forearm. Malfoy immediately collapsed onto his knees, making use of his newly recovered mouth to cry out. Harry felt someone jostling his elbow and he glanced surreptitiously at Hermione; Ron was busily tugging at her bonds, freeing her as well, while Riddle was busy summoning his remaining followers. As soon as she was free, Hermione reached into her pocket for her wand and raised it, disappearing with a *pop!* that went unnoticed by Riddle, due to the noise Malfoy was still making.

"*She'll bring help*," Harry said softly to Ron, who nodded in response. He could have made quick work of Harry's bonds as well, but Riddle turned his head to look at them, his eyes widening when he saw that Hermione was gone. Harry hoped that, behind his back, Ron's hand was on his wand. He didn't know whether Ron was up to the task of dueling with Tom Riddle, but at least he *could* duel with him, Harry thought, as he didn't have a brother wand. On the other hand, he thought, if Ron took my wand from my pocket and he got it to link with Riddle's...

Harry found himself gazing longingly at Riddle's wand, still on the Dark Mark. Suddenly, he took the wand from Malfoy's arm and turned to face Harry and Ron, his features contorted in fury. Ginny still lay on the ground at their feet, her eyes wide, looking back and forth between Harry and Ron on the one hand, Tom Riddle on the other. Harry could see Riddle clutching his wand so tightly that his knuckles were turning white, and his eyes were practically popping out of his skull.

"If you think she can save you by bringing that old fool's supporters, you are far more stupid than I thought", he sneered. "My Death Eaters will be here *before* the girl will have the chance to bring help. After all, she can only Apparate as far as Hogsmeade", he said in a maddeningly logical voice. "One cannot Apparate to Hogwarts."

Harry groaned inwardly as he realized that Riddle was correct; it *would* take Hermione a while to bring reinforcements, even running back to the castle in her wolf form. In the meantime, Harry was starting to hear *pops!* all around him as Death Eaters appeared in the field and in the overgrown garden before the ruined cottage. He counted them mentally as they

approached their master; only about two dozen left. Or only that many could Apparate to Godric's Hollow. It was more than had come to the graveyard in Little Hangleton, three years earlier, but Harry knew that there had been far more before Stonehenge. More than three times this many had escaped from Azkaban. Riddle saw his eyes moving over the Death Eaters and guessed what he was thinking.

"Yes, this is what you have left me", he spat bitterly. "My remaining *free* Death Eaters. However, just because many of my servants are not free, do not underestimate them. They shall feel the Dark Mark... they shall know that I am summoning them... it may take them longer to come to me, but come to me they shall, you mark my words. I *shall* rebuild. You may have taken my dragons and dementors, you may have eliminated Lucius Malfoy and Ludo Bagman — if you knew the things *he's* done for me! — but rebuild I shall. Remember — there are no longer dementors to keep prisoners of the Ministry in check, *and* I still have loyal servants who work for the Ministry... *Let* the stupid girl fetch help, much good it'll do you. I also have servants of which you know nothing", he added in a taunting voice. "Yes, my servants are here, and more shall come."

Harry didn't recognize most of the men and women approaching, the remaining Death Eaters, the ones who had still managed to avoid prison. They were looking at in each other in confusion, clearly wondering about the identity of this wizard with the salt-and-pepper hair. Riddle motioned for them to approach, which they did, hesitating. "Yes, it is I, your Master!" he confirmed in a ringing voice. "My appearance has changed, but your loyalty to me has not, I hope", he added, the implied threat quite clear. Most of them looked less hesitant now, and Harry's eyes scanned the faces, looking for Cho, before he remembered that she was in Ministry custody. Would she come? he wondered. He tried to imagine all of the cells at the Ministry filled with agonized Death Eaters feeling their Marks burning. Would they escape on their own to come to their Master? Or would a traitor to the Ministry free them? And who were these other servants?

Then his heart leapt into his throat as he realized that Snape would have felt the pain from his Dark Mark being activated; he would know just where they were! All he needed to do was get off the Hogwarts grounds so that he could Apparate to Godric's Hollow. Harry looked around the circle of dark-robed figures surrounding them; that probably wouldn't help, one

person, not when the three of them were hemmed in by two dozen Death Eaters, with more to come if Voldemort was correct about his imprisoned servants doing whatever they could to obey his summons. Harry was finding it difficult to continue to think of him as Voldemort, however. When he had lost his temper it was easier, but he looked so unlike the snake-faced monster and so much like the boy from the diary that Harry couldn't help calling him "Riddle" in his head.

And then Harry saw *him*. He gave a very small, almost imperceptible nod. Harry could tell that Riddle had not seen it; he was glaring at Harry, Ron and Ginny. Harry glanced again at Malfoy, who was gazing at Ginny with a look of anguish. Did their fates lie in the hands of these two? he wondered. Plus Hermione. And Snape. Would Dumbledore come? he wondered. He had come to Stonehenge. Surely Hermione would bring Dumbledore... but would it be soon enough?

He looked back at Riddle; it was so strange to see ordinary dark eyes in his face, rather than the red of his altered self. There was complete and utter silence as Riddle gazed back at Harry; every breath seemed to be suspended, waiting, waiting...

"The Warriors of Light shall come."

Riddle looked as though he had awoken from a long sleep, shaking himself. "Who said that?" he demanded. He had not seen Harry's lips move, nor anyone else's. Harry gasped. He had forgotten that Riddle would be able to understand everything Sandy said. Would Riddle know what it meant? he wondered.

"I demand to know who said that!" he screamed, his face turning red with rage.

"Said — said what, M-master?" stuttered a familiar voice. Harry resisted the urge to look at him. Despite the nod, Harry wondered whose side he was *really* on. Had he repented and returned to his Master's service? Was he here of his own volition or against his will?

"*Crucio!*" Riddle cried again, pointing his wand at the speaker, who collapsed onto the ground, howling in agony, making Harry remember what Ginny had just been through. He glanced down at her again, trying to tell her how much he loved her with his eyes alone.

After a few minutes that probably felt far longer to his victim, Riddle lifted his wand and ended the curse. Harry swallowed, looking at the prone, inert figure, wondering whether Riddle would work out who — or

what — had spoken. Another thing about which Harry had never been very clear was whether Voldemort understood that snakes had the Sight. Did he think someone had said that about the Warriors of Light to taunt him? Did he not understand that it was a snake saying it, that it was a prediction?

And then Harry took a moment to think about what Sandy's prediction meant: Hermione was sending help! Or Snape, or Dumbledore. But help was on the way... they had only to survive until help arrived and then everything would be all right. He decided that grinning would be a very bad idea and did his best to hide his elation. *The Warriors of Light shall come.* Well, he thought, it can't be soon enough.

"Now, my Wormtail. Come here and put that silver hand of yours to good use on the werewolf, unless you would like more of the same."

Harry felt like he had stopped breathing. Ron's eyes flashed red and met Harry's. *Silver.*

"Y-yes, M-master", Pettigrew stuttered, staggering awkwardly to his feet and making his slow way toward Ron. His posture was stooped, making his short frame appear smaller still. Harry wondered what tortures Voldemort had visited upon *him* since he had been retrieved from Azkaban.

However, unlike Harry, Wormtail did not know that Ron was no longer bound. As soon as he was within reach of his intended victim, Ron pulled out his wand and pointed it at him. Immediately, three different Death Eaters pointed their wands at Ron in turn, crying out, "*Crucio! Crucio! Crucio!*"

Ron's scream was more like a wolf's howl than anything else and Harry sank to his knees, unable to stop the tears flowing down his cheeks as the three curses converged on his best friend. *Where are the sodding Aurors?* he thought. Ron's wand fell to the ground and Riddle summoned it casually, regarding Ron with a gleeful grin. Ginny's face showed her anguish as she gazed at her tormented brother, convulsing on the ground as the three crackling amber lights connected his body to the wands of the three Death Eaters. Her face was red and blotchy from crying, and Harry could barely make out her saying, "*Ron, Ron we all love you... Ron, be strong...* "

With a nod from Riddle, the curses were lifted. Ron remained on the ground, his eyes wild and red; blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, perhaps from his biting his tongue. Harry, still on his knees, turned to

Riddle. "Stop this!" he screamed. "Torture *me*! Kill *me*! But leave them alone!"

"Oh, but I *shall* kill you, Harry", he said very calmly, twirling Ron's wand between two fingers. "I shall kill you last of all. As for torture, what do you think that was? I've told you already — you get to see your best friends suffer... that is *your* torture. Well", he conceded, "only some of it. But how *would* you propose I torture someone who is unaffected by the Cruciatus Curse, hmm? How else but to torture the ones closest to you while you watch, knowing that it is your fault and your fault alone that they suffer..."

"No!" Harry cried, struggling to his feet. "It is *not* my fault — it's yours! Always yours! All of this suffering is because of *you*, not me! You can stop it at any time!"

Riddle smirked. "Or continue it. Well, you do actually have a point. There really *is* nothing you can do to stop me", he said casually. "I *meant* that your mere continued existence is the reason for their suffering. That and the *things* you have done that have — made me *unhappy*", he said, his voice going into a low growl. Looking straight at Ron, Riddle snapped Ron's wand in two and threw the pieces to the ground. "Think about that as Wormtail does his part now", he said to Harry, before turning to Peter Pettigrew. "Wormtail? Are you ready? As we discussed? Until I tell you to stop."

Peter Pettigrew drew his lips into a line and nodded, then knelt next to Ron, still lying on the ground. With a wave of his hand, Ron's arms and legs were attached to the ground so that he could not move. He struggled, to no avail; the bonds were magical this time. There was nothing physical against which he could fight.

Ron looked up at Pettigrew. "Remember", he rasped through cracked lips, "I was once your Master."

Pettigrew looked shaken by this; after a moment's pause, he ripped open Ron's cloak, robes and shirt, baring his chest. Harry's heart was beating very fast, wondering what he was going to do.

"Aaaaaaaaoooooooooooooh!" Ron cried, turning it into a howl, as Pettigrew pressed his silver hand against his skin, first here, then there; the smell of burning flesh was high in Harry's nose and there were six very distinct burns on Ron's chest, each in the shape of Peter Pettigrew's silver hand. Ron struggled against his invisible bonds, and Ginny finally

managed to sit up, although her arms, like Harry's, were still bound to her sides.

"*Ron!*" she cried over and over, her eyes streaming, her hair sticking to her damp face. Harry had never felt so helpless and so awful. He couldn't transfigure into a golden griffin with his arms bound to his sides and he couldn't reach his wand to curse Pettigrew. He was utterly worthless and useless and it was all his fault that Ron and Ginny were suffering...

"Stop!" Riddle said to Pettigrew, who nodded and backed away from Ron, not meeting his victim's eyes. "So, werewolf, are we enjoying ourselves yet?" Riddle said smoothly, making Harry feel more murderous than when he'd been trying to kill the sixteen year old Riddle in the nearby woods.

Ron didn't answer but glared at Riddle defiantly. He opened his mouth to speak, but suddenly, soft *pops!* started sounding all around them and Harry thought his heart would explode with gratitude. *The Warriors of Light shall come.* Hermione had done it! Help had arrived far more quickly than he'd thought it would, too. People he recognized as Aurors — some of them rescued from Azkaban — were now ranged around the circle of Death Eaters and began the attack. Ron was grinning ear to ear, despite the fact that smoke was still rising from his burns.

"That's my girl", he said softly, smiling.

"But — how did she get Aurors here so quickly?" Harry said, shaking his head in wonder, as the Death Eaters in the circle around them were forced to turn about and give their attention to the Aurors. Immediately, the curses started flying. Harry looked but did not see Hermione among those who had appeared.

"She must have gone straight to the Ministry!" Ron said hoarsely. Harry had no doubt that he was correct; of *course* Hermione would think to do this. It was a good thing *she* was the one who'd gone for help and not him. "She's probably heading for the castle now, to get Dumbledore", Ron added.

Harry nodded, thinking hopefully of the headmaster. *He* could save them... But then he looked at Ginny, and at Draco Malfoy. If we need to be rescued, he thought, perhaps we're not the triangle who will conquer Voldemort... or perhaps this isn't when it will happen. He couldn't possibly see how the current situation could become Voldemort's downfall. The

odds were still most definitely in his favor, even though the older wizard had returned to looking like an actual human being.

Riddle was whirling around, watching his Death Eaters battle the Aurors. The Death Eaters doggedly kept their backs to the center of the circle, so that they formed a barrier between the Aurors and their Master, plus Harry, Ron, Ginny, Draco Malfoy and Peter Pettigrew.

"Do it again, Wormtail!" Riddle cried to Pettigrew, spit flying from his mouth. However, Peter Pettigrew turned, first this way and then that, watching the duels going on all around the perimeter of the circle, a look of wonder on his face. Harry thought he saw Katie at one point, but he hoped he was wrong. Pettigrew then gazed at his Master with the strangest expression Harry had ever seen him wear. A slow, rather mad-looking smile spread across his face, and then he was laughing maniacally.

"Shouldn't you call me *Moonchild*?" he asked Riddle. Despite his attempt to maintain his composure, he was shaking visibly.

"I shall call you *dead* if you do not answer me immediately!" Riddle shrieked, looking completely irrational. Harry couldn't decide which of them was closer to being insane.

"Are you refraining from calling me Moonchild so that you do not have to think about the role I played in your losing your power?" He looked at Draco Malfoy, at Ginny, and finally at Harry. "The Second Triangle is here, Master. I am no longer needed to watch and wait, to prepare. I have — faith", he said in a queer, quiet voice, raising one eyebrow.

"I said to keep torturing the werewolf! I have given you a direct order!"

Pettigrew's shaking had ceased; he looked first at Ron and said, "I am sorry. You were a good and kind Master." Ron looked at him in disbelief as Pettigrew then looked directly at Riddle, saying in a clear, even voice, "I shall not."

And with that, he suddenly fell over dead.

The life was simply gone from him. His body was an empty shell lying in a heap on the ground, his robes too large for the skin-and-bones body to which he had been reduced. Ron found that he could lift his arms and legs from the ground, that upon Pettigrew's death the spell that created his invisible bonds was broken. He didn't stand, though. Instead he crawled over to Pettigrew and gently closed his eyes with his hand.

"I forgive you", he whispered, swallowing. Harry could see the tears rolling down his face, and he could also see that Ron's scarred, burnt chest was already healing over. The skin wasn't as smooth as before but pink and new, the burnt, scabby skin already peeling away. Ron stood, then helped his still-bound sister to stand. Harry found that he couldn't stop looking at Pettigrew's still form.

"What killed him?" he choked, even as the only possible explanation began to prickle at the back of his mind.

"Harry", Ginny whispered. "I think — the Obedience Charm —"

He had absolutely no doubt that she was right. "You put the Obedience Charm on him, didn't you? Just like you put it on Malfoy. Just like you would have put it on me if my parents had promised me to you", Harry growled at Riddle, a fury he had not expected welling up inside him. The older wizard looked highly suspicious.

"How do you know about that?" he demanded.

"That's *my* business", Harry snarled.

Riddle looked scornfully at Harry, the corner of his mouth turning up in an evil half-grin. "Of *course* I put the Obedience Charm on him!" He looked at the dead body, his voice taking on a boastful tone. "*He* did not know at first. Then, through the eyes of Quirrell, my servant, I saw and recognized him again. On the night I lost my body, I had seen him change into a rat, having arrived for our meeting before he knew I was there. I understood then why he called himself 'Wormtail'. I did not tell him that I knew he was an Animagus, however. He had kept this from me, his Master. Now I had a secret from him, in addition to the Obedience Charm, of course. One day, I had Quirrell use the rat to demonstrate a spell during a lesson. Speaking through Quirrell, so that no one else could hear, I told him that I knew who he really was, and I gave him a direct order — to help me become *myself* again. Quirrell was both empowered and weakened by my possession of him. I wished to have another servant upon whom I could rely, should Quirrell fail. A servant to whom I had given some of my own power. I told him of the charm, so that he would understand the consequences of refusing my order. He neither accepted nor refused, but continued to live as your friend's pet rat for another two years", he said disdainfully. "Then, when his true identity was revealed, he came to find me at last in Albania, and he finally gave me an answer. You would not believe the things he went through for me... Once he agreed, he was bound

to do whatever it took, even cutting off his own right hand... there is no fighting the charm. That, I do think, was one of the cleverest things I've ever thought of... Even *you* must concede that..."

"I concede nothing", Harry growled. Screams and groans emanated from the edge of the circle, but they stood in a strangely quiet eye of the storm, the three of them facing Riddle and Draco Malfoy. Then, out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw that Ron had broken Ginny's bonds. He tried to move behind Harry, to free him as well, but he wasn't quick enough.

"M'Lord!" Draco Malfoy cried. "Weasley!" He'd spotted what Ron was up to.

"*Crucio!*" Riddle cried out, pointing at Ron, who ducked behind Harry. The curse hit Harry instead, and he immediately felt hot knives slicing all of the flesh from his bones, no chance to prepare for the curse. He wasn't certain how long the curse had been on him when he was finally able to steel his mind against the pain and float up, up, up, so that he could see everything happening with excruciating slowness.

Ron's mouth moved as he looked at Harry; it appeared that he was saying simply, "*Sorry, mate.*" Ron knew he could take it, Harry thought. He didn't blame Ron, for he saw the reason for his wanting Riddle to be occupied. Ron looked at Riddle, crying out something else, too many words for Harry to make out this time, before turning and running at the circle's perimeter, making a spectacular leap into the air as though he were once again doing a kata. He knocked two Death Eaters to the ground at the same time. Even without a wand, Ron was joining in the fight. Riddle broke the link with Harry and pointed his wand in Ron's direction, his mouth moving slowly, so slowly, and a green arc of light emerged from the tip of his wand like a thread slowly unraveling from a piece of cloth...

But Ron was too fast even for this, and when the curse finally struck someone, it was a Death Eater whom Riddle felled, one of his own servants, the body drifting to earth, the man's eyes wide and surprised. Ron was leaping at yet another Death Eater, dodging another curse, and now this Death Eater fell slowly to the ground, dropping his wand, clutching his chest (where Ron had kicked him) with his other hand. Harry willed himself to return to his body, gasping when he was fully integrated again, abruptly treated to the sound of Riddle shrieking with rage over having accidentally killed one of his own. He could also hear now the screams of one Death Eater after another being attacked by Ron.

Although Harry was still bound, he didn't feel that Ron had abandoned them, as he was doing everything in his power to help the Aurors eliminate Riddle's support. And Ginny was not bound, thanks to Ron. She did not reach for her wand, however. She had another weapon in mind.

"Tom", she said, a choke in her voice. "Please stop this. This isn't what you really wanted when you were young. You never *intended* to kill that girl. Just because you *did* kill her didn't automatically *make* you a murderer. I know what happened, Tom. I know that you thought having the ability to speak to snakes made you like your ancestor, Slytherin. I know that you thought you could be as great a wizard as he was if you opened the Chamber and mastered what was within. You were hurt by your father rejecting you and your mother, and hurt again that other Slytherins didn't think you worthy of their house —"

"No! Not *their* house! *My* house!" Riddle was shaking with fury. "How do you know these things? How *dare* you speak to me this way?" he cried, a note of madness in his voice.

Ginny, for her part, seemed oddly calm. "I dare because I *know* you, Tom. I already told you — I wrote in your diary. For almost a year, I poured out all of my thoughts to you and you in turn told me about your life. It was to make me trust you, and it did, although I know I shouldn't have done. Still — I can't forget the things you told me. I know how the other children at the orphanage treated you, I know how the other Slytherins treated you, because you lived with Muggles. I know how you wanted to prove yourself to them, prove that you were the greatest wizard of all. I know how long and hard you worked, hours and hours of revision. I know how proud you were to be made a prefect! I know, Tom, I know it all —"

Riddle was turning white with rage. "Ginny!" Harry tried to warn her. "Please — are you trying to —" But suddenly, he knew what she was trying to do. He felt no doubt at all. "Don't, Ginny! Please!" he pleaded with her, his heart feeling like it was going to leap out of his chest. But she wouldn't look at him.

"Kill me!" she cried. "Kill me instead of Harry!" Harry shook his head, unable to believe that this was happening. He wished he'd never let her see his Pensieve, see what his mother had done just before Voldemort had tried to curse him. This wasn't what he wanted...

"Silence!" Riddle cried, his eyes blazing. He looked at Harry, smirking. "Yes, I could tell what she was trying to do as well, Potter. Needle me, get under my skin, then ask to be killed in your place. Then, when I curse you, you would be protected by her love. How sweet. How — what is the word for it? *Wrong*." He turned a twisted smile to Ginny. "Yes, I shall kill you, girl, and he shall watch. But I shall not kill *him* after that. At least, not directly. He shall waste away, day after day, having to remember seeing you die for him every second of every day..."

Harry tried to move toward her but Riddle waved his hand and suddenly Harry's feet were planted to the ground. Ginny's feet were also firmly attached to the earth; the two of them were still about eight feet apart, with the bulky plow Portkey between them. Harry thought, *If only we could at least touch!* But he had to settle for looking at her.

"I love you Ginny", he said, his voice breaking.

"I love you, Harry." He could barely make out what she was saying in a hoarse whisper. There was a roar of noise in his head, as though a throng of people were saying to him, *You failed. You failed. You failed.*

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

"*Noooooooooo!*"

Almost simultaneous with his Master beginning to say the curse, Draco Malfoy's cry rang in Harry's ears and he watched in disbelief as the other boy threw himself in the path of the curse, taking the brunt of the crackling green death and falling to the ground, his eyes wide and unseeing, the life drained from him.

Riddle swore violently. "Stupid whelp! That's two servants I've lost now!" Two servants who had to be obedient unto death, that is, Harry thought. He was obviously ignoring the plight of his *other* servants; there were definitely Death Eater bodies visible through the chaos of battle around them, and the circle had closed in, tighter, filling in the gaps, as the remaining Death Eaters continued to attempt to protect their Master. Harry could also see Aurors on the grass, some apparently dead, some groaning. Then he had a flash of someone lying on the grass who was excessively tall, with bright orange hair, and he felt like he couldn't breathe, but a moment later Ron staggered to his feet and went on fighting. Harry let out his breath and turned to Riddle, who was clutching his wand tightly, glaring at Draco Malfoy's body at his feet.

Kicking the body with malicious carelessness, Riddle mumbled, "I always thought he would turn out to be a suicide, and I was right." He looked at Ginny. "But I have unfinished business with *you*, do I not?" Ginny's face was streaming with tears again as she gazed down at Draco Malfoy's lifeless body. Then she lifted her chin and gazed defiantly at Riddle.

"I'm not afraid to die", she said, her voice shaking.

Riddle laughed. "Oh, but you *should* be, little girl. You should be very afraid. For one thing, it is only sensible. Why do you think I have striven so long and hard to avoid death myself? Besides — I can tell that you are lying. You *are* afraid. Quite, quite afraid", he said, thoroughly enjoying himself. Harry couldn't look; he squeezed his eyes shut, still seeing Ginny, as though her image were imprinted on the inside of his eyelids. He thought desperately, *How can I get him hacked off at me, too, so I can die and be with her? I can't not be with her...*

But suddenly, his eyes flew open, and he could see nothing but Ginny. He tried to blink, but nothing happened, and he realized that Riddle must have done something to prevent him from closing his eyes again. Harry remembered him doing this to Karkaroff, before killing him at Dover. His eyes started to water.

"You are going to *see* this, Potter", Riddle said menacingly. Almost with the same breath, no more warning than that, he pointed his wand at Ginny and cried, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

This time there were no obstructions between him and her body; the crackling green light zoomed toward her and touched her brow. Harry's eyes strained and strained to close, but it was no good. His sight was filled with Ginny, Ginny dying...

Only it wasn't.

She seemed to be trembling all over, very fast, and a bluish-white glow emanated from her that grew by the second, until Harry thought he would be blinded by her radiance. His eyes were streaming from not being able to blink, and still the blinding light coming from Ginny grew and grew, the crackling green arc of light still connecting her to Riddle, who looked like he couldn't have dropped his wand if he'd wanted to; it was difficult for Harry to see his face, because of Ginny's glow, but now he could dimly discern that the arc of light was going in the *other* direction, from Ginny to Riddle.

Riddle's arm was shaking as the curse went through him, but unlike the night Harry's parents were killed, he did not utter a sound; he simply dropped his wand, severing the connection, his body falling to the ground with a dull thud.

Harry realized he'd been holding his breath when he let it out in a long exhalation. He blinked — then realized that he *could*. He put his hands up to his face — then realized that he could do that, too. His feet were no longer bound to the earth, either, and he ran around the plow to get to Ginny, who was still standing where she had been as though too stunned to move. He threw his arms around her and hugged her limp body; she gazed up at him, her eyes practically catatonic, peering out through wild strands of hair. She seemed utterly drained.

"You did it!" he cried. "He's — he's dead! You did it, Ginny!"

She shook her head, still not looking quite sensible. "No... *he* did it. All I did was to get him hacked off at me, make him want to kill me sooner. But Draco... he died in my place... And you tricked Tom into eating the sweets, else he'd have been like he was before, a sort of ghost and yet not a ghost..."

"Goading him wasn't doing nothing, though, Ginny. You knew just how to get under his skin. You knew things that no one else could have..."

She sighed in resignation. "All right, Harry. We all did something, are you happy?" Her words ended on a sob as she knelt and gazed at the still form of Draco Malfoy. Harry swallowed, also looking down at Draco. He hadn't meant to upset her, but it was true. The three of them had all done something —

The three of them had fulfilled the Prophecy.

He looked at Draco Malfoy and then to where Peter Pettigrew lay, on the far side of the plow. "The Moon Children", he whispered. "They both sacrificed themselves."

She shook her head. "I don't understand why he cursed me, after Draco was killed. He knew what I was doing when I told him to kill me instead of you, yet he went ahead and tried to kill me after Draco took the curse..."

Harry remembered Voldemort giving Draco Malfoy a package and telling him that "the girl" was beneath him. Draco had responded that she was pureblood... Harry knew they were discussing Mariah. Had Voldemort thought Mariah was the only girl about whom Draco Malfoy cared? "I

think he didn't know how Draco felt about you. I don't think he thought of it as Draco dying because he loved you. He called it a suicide, remember."

"We were always assuming the worst of him, but Draco didn't really betray us", she said sadly, gently closing the still, grey eyes with her hand. "He didn't have free will. But he did betray Voldemort. Tom."

Harry frowned. "Why are you talking about his betraying us? I didn't say he did." *I thought it, though.*

"Don't you know the full Prophecy?" Harry shook his head and she recited it for him, finishing with, "*The Lion loves the Daughter bright, As does the child of silver moon, But the Dark Lord's servant shall betray. What though they flee before their fate, Three shall bring forth the days of doom, And Love shall end the Dark Lord's reign.* Maggie told me", she whispered.

"Betray..." Harry mumbled, looking down at Draco's waxy face. He shook his head. "I knew he was — he was capable of sacrificing himself to help me change the timelines, but this —"

Suddenly, he couldn't help thinking, *It isn't fair.*

Why, though? another voice in his head argued.

Because she doesn't love him. He died for love, but it was all one-sided... If I could have moved, I would have taken the curse for her...

But you couldn't move. He knew that. And what makes you think he just did it for her? Perhaps he did it for you, too.

This thought startled Harry, and made him think yet again of the boy who had been his best friend for most of his other life. He stared down at the still body. *It still isn't fair*, he thought. *He's a hero, but he'll only be honored in death. He'll never be able to LIVE as a hero.*

Life isn't fair. You know that.

That doesn't mean I have to like it.

Ginny cried on him while he held her tightly, all the while looking at Draco Malfoy's face over her shoulder, aware of the fights still going on, just beyond the circle of Death Eaters. They were all keeping busy enough that none had yet noticed the fate of their Master. He couldn't help the memories flooding his head, memories of growing up with Draco, traveling around the country with him, writing in the diary. In the end, he had shown his true colors. He had been the Draco Malfoy Harry had known he always could be, if he really wanted to. And with that, his life

had ended. *It should be a beginning*, he thought. *Not an end*. He sighed. There was nothing he could do now, though. Dead was dead.

Dead is dead.

He remembered Hermione saying that, when they were discussing the spell in his snake book. But according to that book, dead was *not* dead.

Maybe.

"The Griffin shall fly."

Harry sighed. Sandy was no doubt correct; he would need to fly before long, join in the battle, which seemed to have been raging forever. It was his duty to do whatever he could to fight. He looked regretfully down at Draco's startled face. *Sorry, mate. Duty calls.*

But even as he was standing and pulling Ginny to her feet, suddenly, the cries from the battle increased in volume, a cacophonous crescendo, and they looked up to see, between the backs of the Death Eaters, still oblivious to their Master's fate, elves appearing all over with sharp *cracks*! He couldn't help but grin when he saw that, and then he spotted Hermione, too, and Professor McGonagall, and Flitwick, plus a number of students from the Dueling Club. He even saw students appear who hadn't passed the test to Apparate, clutching things like brooms and rolls of parchment, and he knew that these were things hastily chosen to be made into Portkeys in order to get the best fighters to the battle.

However, he could see, despite the new troops, that the battle was going very badly. The Death Eaters were far more ruthless in their tactics than the Aurors had been; he realized, with a shock, that there were now *more* Death Eaters in the circle than there had been at the start, and that was despite many of them having fallen. Harry knew then that Voldemort had probably been right, that even the Death Eaters in prison at the Ministry had done whatever they could to come. Perhaps the Aurors who had been recruited to come fight would normally have been guarding the Ministry cells. Perhaps it had been one of the Death Eaters still working undercover at the Ministry; if even one Death Eater put Imperius on the cellblock guards, that could do it...

He remembered the feeling of helpless momentum pulling him on when he'd been in the woods with Tom Riddle, the frustration at not being the master of his own destiny. He had been able to fight Imperius, but he couldn't fight the Obedience Charm. It had been such a relief when he'd

thought of setting the diary afire, and he was so relieved that it had worked, that Riddle disappeared, his wand falling to the ground...

Wand.

Harry looked down, seeing Voldemort's wand where it lay next to the body of the dead wizard. He looked again at Draco and thought, *Maybe there is a way.* A way to fight and win the battle and still do something about the price Draco had had to pay. He started breathing more quickly, knowing what he was going to do. First he put his hand out and closed his eyes, concentrating as hard as he could on the night his parents died, on Riddle disappearing while the diary burned. He could see it in his mind's eye, he could...

Without even bothering to take out his wand, he opened his eyes and kept his arm out, hand ready, crying loudly, "*Accio wand!*"

The right wand, the wand he wanted, soon came soaring out of the trees. He could see it clearly, flying over the heads of those embroiled in the battle, and then it was falling toward him. He caught it deftly, turning it over and over in his hands, wiping the dirt and rotten leaves from it, revealing the yew wood, as hardy as ever. His fingers tingled as he touched it, and red and gold sparks spouted from the end. He gasped, never having seen another wand respond that way to him except his own. He bent to pick up its identical twin brother from the ground; this one had been better cared for, but it was clearly exactly like the wand Harry had summoned. This one also vibrated in his hand and spouted the red and gold sparks.

He could hear Sirius' voice in his head, from three years earlier: "*So what happens when a wand meets its brother?*"

"*They will not work properly against each other... If, however, the owners of the wands force the wands to do battle... a very rare effect will take place...*" Dumbledore had said.

But what, Harry wondered, would happen if two *identical* wands met each other? He didn't think the people wielding the wands would be hurt, just as neither he nor Voldemort were hurt when their wands locked, but he also remembered the way the web of golden light distracted and confounded the Death Eaters who were present just after Voldemort regained his body. And the shades... perhaps the shades would once again help distract. Both wands would be Voldemort's, so it didn't matter whose wand was forced to regurgitate its spells. Either way, if it caused *Priori*

Incantatem to happen again, the shades of people he had killed would appear...

He had to try it. Only — he didn't want it to be him. There was other work he had to attend to. *Twin brother wands!* he thought again. Had this ever happened? He didn't think it likely. *Too bad both Fred and George aren't here — I wonder what effect there would be from twin brothers wielding twin wands.*

Then he turned and saw Ginny, kneeling by Draco Malfoy's body, thinking, *Yes. That's it. And then she won't be able to stop me from doing what I have to do, she'll be far too busy...*

"Ginny!" he cried. "Get out your wand! You may need to protect yourself. I'm going to get Ron. We need him."

She didn't argue but took out her wand, standing to attention, wiping her face with her sleeve and nodding at him. He handed her the two identical wands.

"Keep these safe until I get back with Ron."

She nodded again, but then both of them stood transfixed as the red and gold sparks shot from the wands again, vibrating in her hand. She looked up at Harry in alarm, her brown eyes wide through her tousled hair, which was obscuring half her face. He quickly changed into his griffin form and took a running leap into the air, spreading his wings, feeling the familiar exhilaration soar through him. He was no sooner in the air, however, than he saw one of the Death Eaters turn to check on his Master, seeing only the three dead bodies near the plow and Ginny in the center of the circle, holding Voldemort's two identical wands. She had evidently put her own wand away.

The Death Eater shouted something and pointed his wand at her, but she immediately put up both wands, cried out an incantation, and a bluish shield crackled around her, deflecting the curse. She then pointed one of the wands at the wizard and sent him flying backward, his wand soaring in a high arc and into her waiting hand. He saw her throw his wand on the ground and incinerate it with the other Voldemort wand. Ginny was simply crackling with power, and Harry turned away to look for Ron, satisfied that she was indeed the Daughter of War, that she could hold her own. At the back of his mind, something nagged at him, the reason for her increased power, but he pushed this thought away and concentrated on trying to find

Ron in the chaos below. He noticed that Dumbledore was nowhere to be seen, and he wondered at that.

He spotted Ron, finally, fighting hand to hand with a man dressed as a Muggle who seemed every bit as strong as Ron, each of them throwing the other over their heads and yet getting up and coming back for more. Then Harry noticed more people battling the professors, Aurors, elves and Dueling Club members, all of them dressed like Muggles, many of the men excessively hairy. Harry immediately guessed who they were:

Voldemort's werewolves.

He had recruited werewolves to join him and had evidently provided them with Portkeys, which took them to him when he activated their Dark Marks. (Harry could see the Mark on the arm of the man who was fighting with Ron.) They must have arrived after the Death Eaters, he thought.

To help Ron, Harry came right down on the head of the werewolf he was battling. The man cried out in pain, then, to Harry's shock, he threw Harry about twenty feet, making him gasp with pain when he landed. Harry was very close to his parents' house now and he changed back to his human form, taking out his wand and pointing it at the man.

"Stupefy!"

The werewolf went over like a board, and Ron ran to Harry, not even breathing heavily. "Thanks, mate. He was really starting to annoy me. Wish I had my wand... he wouldn't have done so well against me then —"

"You want a wand?" Harry said, raising his eyebrow. "Have I got a wand for *you*. I'm going to transform again; when I do, get on and we'll fly back to the center of the circle. I have a job for you."

Ron frowned, not understanding, but Harry had no sooner said this than Ron pulled him to the ground, several curses flying over their heads as some Death Eaters noticed that they were alone and vulnerable. Harry pulled out his wand and handed it to Ron. "Don't bloody lose it", he growled, changing into a griffin and taking to the air again. Now Ron was able to use his Dueling Club experience. Harry was going to help him, but then he saw a contingent of about a dozen elves fighting four wizards and doing very badly; in the time it took him to notice them, three of the elves were felled by curses. He flew over the heads of the Death Eaters and landed behind them, changing back as soon as his paws touched earth and holding out his arms, concentrating very hard on the middle two wizards, who seemed to be the most troublesome.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he cried, remembering disarming Lucius Malfoy when he was a seven-year-old, when he was angry enough, in his other life. The two wands flew up and out of the wizards' hands and they fell to the ground, grunting.

"Remember your training!" Harry cried to the elves, catching the wands as they flew neatly into his hand. "Flanking formation! Keep moving!" While they were on the ground, Harry stunned the wizards with one of their own wands before breaking the wands over his knee.

The elves seemed to have woken up. Immediately, three of them disappeared with a *crack!* to appear behind the two remaining wizards, who whirled in surprise. The other six elves disappeared and then reappeared, three to the left and three to the right of the surprised wizards. With a collective motion, the elves all sent the two men whooshing through the air, colliding painfully with each other, knocking them unconscious. One of the elves — who, like all of them, were in uniform, he noted — clicked his heels together and saluted Harry smartly, saying, "Thank you, General Harry Potter, sir! We is proud to serve under you!"

Harry couldn't help grinning at him, but he returned the salute properly. "Carry on, Lieutenant. Remember what you've all been taught. You can do this!"

"Yes, sir, General Harry Potter, sir!" squeaked the elf, nodding at his fellows, who all disappeared with a *crack!* Harry ran back to Ron, now fighting yet another werewolf, who was reduced to cowering on the ground, looking very frightened.

"Confundus Charm", Ron said, nodding at the man. "Thinks he's around three now, he does. Where's Ginny, Harry? Is she all right? What's happening? Where's You-Know-Who?"

Harry gawped at him. "You don't know? I'll show you. And Ginny's fine. You'll see. Trust me — she can hold her own."

He changed again. Once Ron was seated on him and clutching his mane tightly, he leapt into the air, moving back toward Ginny. He landed next to her; she'd fought off some more Death Eaters, single-handedly, and was standing by the plow holding both wands, her eyes wild.

"Where'd that come from?" Ron wanted to know, nodding at Ginny's extra wand. Then, remembering that he had Harry's wand, he gave it back to him.

"Thanks. It's Voldemort's. So's the other one. They're identical. I summoned the one from the woods that was left there when I fixed the timelines. It's just been sitting there for seventeen years."

Ron looked at Harry open-mouthed. "How did you get his bleeding wand from him?" But then Harry pointed to the far side of the plow and Ron strode over to the bodies in disbelief. "And Malfoy's dead, too? He killed Malfoy? Or did you do it?" he added hopefully.

"He leapt in front of the Killing Curse, Ron", Ginny said, with tears in her voice. "He died for me."

"Incidentally, Ron", Harry said, trying to divert Ginny, "have you seen Dumbledore at all?" It had been such a relief when he arrived at Stonehenge; Harry had expected to see him by now.

Ron looked grim, shaking his head. "No, Harry, I haven't. He must have been worried about leaving Hogwarts undefended. Probably stayed there just in case this was a ruse and You-Know-Who planned to attack the school."

Harry nodded in agreement, although something about this felt very wrong to him. He had a bad feeling about it in the pit of his stomach. Ron was staring uneasily at the dead form of Draco Malfoy. "So *what* do you want me to do?" he said in confusion. "Use You-Know-Who's wand?"

"No. I want you to use *Tom Riddle's* wand. Against Ginny. Who will also be using Tom Riddle's wand. You need to cast spells against each other — preferably *identical* spells, like the Disarming Charm, to try to get the wands to lock. You are brother and sister. The wands are identical twins. The power of this — I expect this to produce a quite spectacular effect. We can use this to our advantage..."

He explained to them that it didn't matter whose wand produced the reverse spell effect. Ron nodded. "All right. It's worth a try. What do you want us to do?"

He sent them to opposite sides of the circle and shouted with his hands cupped around his mouth, "Cast the spell at each other on my signal! Make sure the wands lock!"

They both nodded, grim as death, waiting for the sign from him. He lifted his own wand, and they simultaneously pointed the wands at each other, crying out in unison, "*Expelliarmus!*"

The arcs of red light met in the air. Harry wanted to weep for joy; he could see that both Ginny and Ron were struggling to keep their grips on

the vibrating wands as the beam of light connecting them changed color from red to deep gold, just as he remembered it. Ginny was using two hands, her knuckles white, and he could see grim determination on Ron's face.

Then — he remembered this happening to him and Voldemort — their feet left the ground, the wands still connected by the thread of light. They were drifting over toward the sloping green meadow on the far side of the cottage's ruins, away from the trees. Everyone on the ground who had been embroiled in battle stood stock-still and gazed up in wonder.

The golden thread binding them multiplied now, the strands arcing high over Ginny and Ron, creating a golden dome under which the Aurors and elves now instinctively sheltered, along with the professors and students. The Death Eaters and werewolves shouted at them from outside the dome, clearly confused. They tried attacking, but those under the protection of the dome could not be touched, and Harry saw more than one curse deflected from the golden web, while multiple curses were able to leave the dome, finding their marks, felling one attacker after another. And then he saw that a shade had emerged from the wand Ron was holding; it appeared to be Draco Malfoy. He slid down the dome into the midst of the Death Eaters and werewolves, scattering them... Then more shades began to emerge from the wand, and Harry swallowed, seeing that it was *working*.

Finally, the most wonderful sound met his ears: *phoenix song*. The sound of hope. It was far louder and more resonant than he remembered, but that might have been because the two wands were identical, rather than just brother wands. The music filled his heart, which felt like it would burst; he knew that they could *do* this. It was going to work. He looked down at Draco Malfoy's body, thinking of the spritely shade he had just seen. Draco would be doing that again, walking the earth, but not just as a shade if Harry had anything to do with it. No one could stop him now. He could do what he had to do, what should be done. And more importantly, he knew that the others were going to be all right, he wasn't abandoning them in their time of need. They were going to be fine...

The music sang in his head and his heart as he reached into his sleeve and pulled out Sandy. She looked up at him guilelessly.

"Yes, Harry Potter? Did you not understand the last thing that I Saw?"

"No, Sandy, that was actually very easy. I understood it just fine. Sorry I didn't say anything. I need you for something now. For a special spell." The phoenix song made his entire body feel like it was made of music.

"What am I to do?" she asked obligingly. "You are not going to turn me into a human girl again, are you?"

He laughed; the music made him feel he could accomplish *anything*. "No, but I am going to put an engorgement spell on you. It will make you much larger."

She seemed to nod. "Very well, Harry Potter. You may do so."

He placed her on the ground, pointing his wand at her and saying, "*Engorgio!*"

He did not terminate the spell immediately but kept his wand trained on her; she began to both lengthen and expand in thickness, and he did not lift his wand to break the spell until she was about fifteen feet long. When he did lift it, he felt quite drained, and wondered whether he had enough energy and concentration left to execute the next spell. Could he do it? He *had* to do it. He had a moment of doubt, glancing at Riddle's body. *If it will bring back Riddle, too, I won't do it*, he thought. He gazed down at Draco Malfoy's face. It just wasn't fair. He was a hero. He didn't deserve this. Tom Riddle did, but not Draco, not his best friend, not after what he'd done for Ginny...

Sandy said something to him then, in a far deeper voice than he'd ever heard her use. He shook his head, not really comprehending it. "Are you still predicting things that are going to happen in a few minutes, Sandy? Or is your Sight that of a large snake now?"

She paused a moment in thought. "I think that it is possible that your having increased my size has increased the depth and breadth of my Sight."

He nodded; that made sense. Which meant that he did not need to worry immediately about what she'd said. It did give him hope, though, for the future. That was something. If she was right, then he *had* to do this. He just had to.

"Put your tail in your mouth, please, Sandy."

"Very well, Harry Potter."

Harry picked up the body of Draco Malfoy, which felt strangely insubstantial, and stepped into the ring formed by Sandy biting her own

tail. He glanced at the dome of golden light, his heart feeling like it would burst. *They were doing it; they were really doing it...*

He looked at the boy whose lifeless shell he held, remembering the friend who had traveled by his side all the way from Huntly to London, to Dover and back to London, and finally to this place...

"Draco, why don't you try to use Voldemort's wand to do the spell with me? Then when the timeline changes back, you'll remember this life. You'll remember Jamie..."

"But I don't want to remember..."

"Draco, why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Writing in the diary. Sacrificing yourself."

"You know why, Harry. So you can fix the timelines."

"But — what I mean is — You said you were no friend; that you'd done something awful. And I've thought and thought about it, and I can't for the life of me figure out what could have been so bad."

"You'll hate me if I tell you."

"No I won't. And even if it's as dreadful as you say — you're obviously trying to make up for it."

"No matter what I do, Harry, even this, there's never really any making up for it. You don't understand..."

Draco had done what he needed to do, Harry knew. He had done everything possible to warn Ginny without running afoul of that damned Obedience Charm. It wasn't his fault that they hadn't been able to prevent Ron from touching the plow, it wasn't his fault that Ginny was swept along...

I have to do this.

He swallowed and pointed his wand at the heavens.

"Enuma!"

In the distance, a faint rumbling was heard.

"Elish!"

The rumbling grew ever louder and he saw dark clouds begin moving swiftly across the sky, which was darkening by the second.

"*Tiamat!*"

The clouds were overhead now, lightning flashing in a blood-red sky.

"*Apsu!*"

A lightning bolt struck the ground at Harry's feet and the earth trembled; around the golden dome, he could see the remaining Death Eaters and werewolves falling to the ground, as well as those under the dome's protection, even the small soldiers of the Elven Army. Only Ginny and Ron, hovering in the air, seemed immune. Harry struggled to keep a firm hold on his wand and Draco Malfoy's body. A fissure opened at his feet that was nonetheless contained within the encompassing circle of Sandy's body. The fissure opened wider and wider and Harry shook from head to toe, staring into its inky depths. His heart was in his throat; he knew what he must do, but every fiber of his being fought against it now that he was confronted with the fact of it. The human being's basic survival instinct was beating against his brain, willing him to continue to live, to be of this world.

He thought of his mother, how every instinct in her must have been saying, "*Save yourself! Save your child!*" He thought of how he had amplified that inner voice for her when he put the Imperius Curse on her. How very hard it must have been for her to deny that voice, to say, "*Kill me!*" He swallowed; he had always idolized his father, had always wanted to be like him in any way he could. But now, now, he needed to be his mother's son, he had to have all of her nerve and daring to do this...

Finally, with a defiant yell, he leapt, and in that second when his head disappeared below the surface of the earth, the fissure closed with a sudden sucking sound, and the shaking of the earth ceased. All was quiet. Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy were nowhere to be seen. They had gone where none could follow...

...into the abyss.

* * *

Harry knew he was falling, but he didn't know for how long. He no longer felt the dead weight of the body in his arms, although he could feel the wood of his wand under his fingers. He was surrounded by blackness.

Down, down... Or was it? He became aware of the fact that he had merely assumed that he was falling because he had jumped into an opening in the earth; now he realized that although he felt movement, his senses could not tell him whether it was up, down or sideways. That inner

sense that tells most creatures of earth which way is up did not seem to be functioning at all. Harry could have been a new satellite orbiting the earth; he had no way to judge. There was nothingness all around him.

Time passed; Harry did not know how much. He found himself thinking about many things. He thought of girls he'd kissed or made love to; Ginny, Hermione, Katie, Cho, Alicia, Mariah, Ginny again... He thought about playing Quidditch, and about that first exhilarating ride on a broomstick when he was eleven and about the thrill of playing Quidditch for Wales... He thought about his friends, about meeting Ron on the Hogwarts express, about growing up with Draco and Jamie, about running with Dudley and dueling with Neville... He thought about looking up to Severus Snape as his stepfather, about his one hour of happiness when he was not quite fourteen and thought he might be able to go live with Sirius, about Remus Lupin teaching him to conjure a Patronus and Aberforth teaching him to work the soil... He remembered his heart welling up inside him when Dumbledore had raised his goblet to him after the Triwizard Tournament... He saw again in his mind's eye that moment when Hagrid burst through the door of the hut on the rock and told Harry that he was a wizard... He thought of Professor McGonagall smiling at him in approval when he'd first done the Animagus transfiguration, about Mrs. Weasley letting him cry on her after Cedric's death, about his argument with his mother and holding her in his arms afterward while she cried... He thought of bringing Cedric's body back to the Diggorys and carrying Dudley's coffin to the graveyard and then throwing the fistful of dirt on its lid, watching his brother Stuart die, holding his mother's body again after he'd disarmed her, mourning Ginny and the baby that never was... leaping from the fortress of Azkaban as a golden griffin, flying to freedom on the mainland, and returning to the prison to free the Aurors...

He fell or rose or drifted in nothingness, his thoughts coming thick and fast, and he wondered whether he was dead now, too, and this was what his eternity would be like, drifting aimlessly through blackness with his chaotic thoughts, no rhyme or reason to give form and meaning to it all...

Then he stopped. It was as though someone had suddenly slid a shelf under his feet, upon which he now stood with shaky legs. Light appeared so abruptly that he put his hand up and covered the lenses of his glasses; then he carefully lowered his hand and blinked, looking around. He still clutched his wand.

He was out of doors, standing on the path leading up to Hogwarts castle. It was a beautiful day; Harry could not identify the season, but the trees were green, rather than turning colors or still bearing blossoms, so perhaps it was summer. He stared at the castle; he had started to think he would never see it again, but here he was. He wondered again whether he was still alive. Somehow, he had lost Draco Malfoy's body. He looked down at his empty arm, which had been holding Draco when he leapt. Harry swallowed; he had just realized that there was no breeze; not a breath of wind stirred the grass or the leaves on the trees. He walked slowly toward the doors to the entrance hall. In the back of his mind, he knew he couldn't really be at Hogwarts, but somehow it was comforting to see it...

"Yes, it *is* comforting, isn't it?"

Harry's jaw had dropped; suddenly, standing on the steps to the castle was — his sister. She looked as she had the last time he'd seen her. Her long dark hair was touched with red where the light hit it, and her green eyes sparkled when she smiled, as she did now. He ran toward her, gasping, expecting her to recede from him and change, as she had in his dreams, but instead he was able to throw his arms around her. He held her tightly, unable to believe she was really here, burying his face in her hair.

"Jamie! Oh, I never thought I'd see you again. Oh, Jamie, Jamie", he repeated like a litany, kissing her on the forehead, then hugging her again. When she did not respond in kind, instead looking up at him dispassionately, Harry sensed that something was wrong. He backed up.

"You find me comforting too, don't you?"

Harry frowned; the cadence of her voice wasn't quite right. It was too stiff and rehearsed. He looked at her shrewdly and asked slowly, "Who are you, really?"

"I am Tiamat. But you can call me by your sister's name. You invoked me with your spell. I look like this because I determined that this would be comforting to you. This —" and she waved her hand at the castle, "also has an appearance that should be comforting and familiar to you."

Harry also waved his hand at the castle. "What is it really?"

Jamie smiled indulgently. "There are many names for it. The simplest way to explain it to you would be to call it the Realm of the Dead. My sister, Ereshkigal, is queen here, but I can act as your guide until we reach her. You must pass through seven gates..."

"Where's Draco? When I entered the abyss, I had his body. He's why I'm here. I — I want to save him. To bring him back to life, if I can. Can you tell me if it's even possible?"

She smiled at him. "Yes, it is possible. But only a handful of people who have attempted this over thousands of years have succeeded; the others were unwilling to do what was necessary to accomplish their goal. It is possible for someone who is willing. Are you willing?"

"Yes", he nodded vigorously. She closed her eyes and inclined her head in approval.

"Then we should begin."

She turned and knocked on the enormous front doors of the castle. The doors opened slowly and she stepped just inside them. When Harry tried to do the same, an invisible barrier prevented him from crossing the threshold and he could not follow her.

"What —"

"You must pay. As I said, there are seven gates. This is the first gate. At each gate you must pay or you cannot pass. If you still have something to offer for the life of this 'Draco' after you pass through the seventh gate, it is possible that you may save him. Of course, you still have to be willing. Otherwise, you will go back without him. If you have nothing you are willing to give in payment after passing through the seventh gate, you will return to your life without him and you may not ask for any other favors. This is a request that can only be made by a person once. Do you wish to begin? What will you give as your price for passing through the first gate?"

Harry stared at her, perplexed. "I — I don't know. What kind of thing would be all right? I don't know what you're looking for."

She nodded at him. "Your cloak will do nicely."

Harry shrugged it off impatiently, then passed it to her. Immediately, he was able to step across the threshold to stand in the cavernous entrance hall. Harry looked behind him, at the still landscape that looked so exactly like the real thing. He turned back to the girl who looked like his sister at fifteen.

"That's it? That's all I have to do?"

But he had no sooner asked than he felt an icy wind sweep down the marble stairs and engulf the entrance hall with an arctic blast. Harry

hugged himself, his teeth chattering. She seemed unaffected by the sudden cold. She smiled sweetly at him and held the cloak out.

"Would you like it back?"

He stared at her and at his cloak; as tempting as it was, he needed to push on; he couldn't get discouraged now.

Through the clacking of his teeth, he said, "No, thank you. I'd — I'd like to move on."

She draped the cloak over the elaborately carved marble newel post at the foot of the stairs, exactly like the one at the real Hogwarts. Then she nodded at him and walked to the enormous closed doors of the Great Hall. She swung these open and the chill wind that had been sweeping through the entrance hall — which seemed not to affect her at all — abruptly ceased. Jamie looked at him expectantly. He looked back at her, perplexed.

"This is the second gate."

Harry looked at the hall; it appeared to be the same as ever. The four house tables stretched out before him, the candles floating above them, and the polished goblets on the head table caught the light and glittered in the distance. He turned to the facsimile of his sister.

"What do you want?"

"Do you wish to keep your robes?"

Harry looked down at his wizard robes, then back up at her. "I guess I can give them up", he said shakily. He removed the robes Mrs. Weasley had made for him, an ache in his heart, and handed them to her; he felt an inexplicable loss and emptiness without them. He cautiously stepped over the threshold and stood in the Great Hall, swallowing with apprehension. Suddenly, the hall was filled with students, all suddenly pointing at him and jeering.

"Oi! Look at the Muggle with no robes! Muggle, Muggle, no-robe Muggle..." a boy chanted, pointing at him. The next thing Harry knew, students of all ages were pointing at him and shouting, "*Muggle, Muggle, no-robe Muggle...*" There seemed to be thousands of people rather than hundreds. The voices echoed off the stone and reverberated around the huge chamber. Harry covered his hands with his ears. He could barely hear his sister when she spoke calmly to him, her placid face clearly not registering the cacophony of voices around them.

"Would you like your robes back?" she asked sweetly.

Harry's eyes were watering from the noise, his head throbbing. He wanted to be anywhere else in the world. All he could hear were cries of, "*MUGGLE! MUGGLE! MUGGLE!*"

He thought of the note Mrs. Weasley had sent him with the clothes she had made for him; he wondered what she would say if she knew he'd given them up. He vacillated, his heart in his throat. Then he remembered Draco, his almost-lifeless form lying on the bunk in the tent at Godric's Hollow, having given almost all of his strength, his life-force, so that Tom Riddle could emerge from the diary and be duped by Harry...

He shook his head, then shouted, "*NO!*"

The hall was still and utterly devoid of students. He and his sister were the only two people present, his last word still echoing in the cavernous space. He blinked and slowly took his hands down from his ears. His sister walked purposefully toward the door which hid the secret staircase to the Potions office. Harry followed her, looking around the hall again, thinking how vividly real those other people had been, yelling and shouting at him, pointing and jeering.

She opened the door and stopped, then turned to look at him expectantly. "Is this another gate?" he asked.

"Yes."

He looked down. He was becoming more and more apprehensive. "Am I going to have any clothes left by the time I go through all seven gates?"

She gazed at him calmly. "When you were born, how many articles of clothing were you wearing?"

He swallowed; well, he thought, I guess that answers my question. "None."

She nodded. "Do you wish to go on?"

He sighed.

"If I give up my shirt, can I go through this gate?"

"Yes."

He unbuttoned his shirt and slipped it off his shoulders and arms. The air was rather pleasant on his shoulders and back, and he felt a warm current moving the sparse, almost invisible hair on his chest. She took the shirt from him and he followed her down the steep stairs, his stomach in knots as he waited with apprehension for something to happen.

Nothing did.

He reached the bottom and stopped, wondering why there didn't seem to be any catch this time. There was no light, but he could sense her presence ahead of him in the passage. He was tempted to light his wand, but he didn't know whether it would even work in this realm. He heard her moving further away from him, so he sped up.

He walked straight into the spider webs.

They were at chest height, exactly where he would be most aware of them, now that he was shirtless. He flinched at the silky threads passing over his skin; he had gooseflesh all over his arms. Then he felt something drip on his shoulder from the ceiling of the passage, and he thought he was going to be sick. The salve that he'd applied to his skin in what seemed another lifetime was no longer in effect. He heard and felt more dripping, more globules of sticky gelatinous stuff falling on him, which now caused the webs to stick to his skin. He whirled, trying to brush the goo and webs off, fighting the urge to spew when it got on his left hand. He still held his wand tightly in his right hand. He stumbled along, trying to wipe more and more repulsive things from his skin. He finally stopped when he stumbled into his sister. Suddenly there was light; she was holding a candle in her right hand. The underside of her nose and chin were very bright, but her eyes were in shadow.

"Would you like your shirt back?" she said in a friendly voice, as though he weren't covered in slimy, crawling things he didn't want to think about. Something dropped on his shoulder and then started moving toward his neck. He swallowed, shaking.

"No", he said with his jaw clenched.

She touched the wall, which Harry knew pivoted and led into the office. "The fourth gate."

She seemed to be looking at him expectantly, although he still could not see her eyes. "Your boots and socks", she said.

"That's four things!"

"Your foot coverings, then. All of them. If you wish to continue."

Something else landed on his back, something with at least eight legs. He quickly bent over and pulled off his boots; his socks came off at the same time, so that he was standing in the passage barefoot and bare-chested, in just his breeches and underwear. She nodded and put her shoulder to the wall, opening it.

She crossed to the door of the office. He started to follow her; then he noticed that there was nothing on his shoulders or anywhere else on the skin above his waist. The spider webs and other things were gone. Unfortunately, his relief was short-lived, for suddenly the floor seemed to be on fire beneath his feet. He panicked, running mindlessly back toward the pivoting door into the passage, wincing with every step, then realized that he needed to just get it over with, so he dashed toward the door of the office, every step pure agony. It was worse than walking barefoot on hot coals; it was walking barefoot on the sun. His feet were blistered and there was damaged skin peeling off the balls and heels of both feet, revealing tender skin that was being further roasted with every step he took. Harry's eyes were watering and he fought the very, very strong urge to cry for mercy.

"Would you —" she began to say, standing calmly on the burning floor, apparently suffering no pain of any kind.

But Harry had already starting ripping off his breeches; he threw them at her and flew at the office door that led into the potions classroom. He stood on the cool stone floor, breathing heavily, wiping the unshed tears from his eyes; he bent down, his hands on his knees. All he had left were his black boxers. He'd gone through five gates; there were two left, and he didn't have enough things to give up. But then he pushed his glasses up his nose and realized that he was wrong; he could give his glasses. If his sister would accept them, that would take him through seven gates.

He started walking through the potions classroom, relieved that he'd thought of this, but suddenly he was surrounded by nettles; thorny bushes seemed to have sprung up from the floor and were blocking his path to the corridor. The thorns seemed to be specifically positioned to attack his legs, and before long, his thighs and calves were skinned and bleeding profusely as he tried to make his way across the room. He used his wand to push some of the worse-looking thorns out of the way, but after he passed, they whipped back and struck him painfully on the backs of his legs. Jamie was standing in the corridor, waiting for him. She didn't ask him whether he wanted his breeches back.

When he reached the door, he touched the air in the doorway, feeling the unyielding pressure again that indicated that the gate was closed to him. She looked at him dispassionately; he took off his glasses and handed

them to the blur that now only vaguely resembled his sister, and walked through into the corridor. He'd gone through the sixth gate.

He looked down, and was not at all surprised to see that the skin of his legs was completely intact; there were no long bloody gashes, no nettles sticking in his skin. He raised his head again and looked up and down the passage. "Which way now?" he asked, nervous about what might happen now that he didn't have his glasses. He liked to see the world clearly and always put his glasses on before getting out of bed every morning. She turned and walked deeper into the dungeons without a word. He followed her; she was moving toward Slytherin House.

They had gone only about ten feet when suddenly a gust of wind blew something in his eye; he squeezed it shut in pain. Then the wind grew stronger, and more and more small particles were striking his face and trying to squeeze in between his eyelids. He tried to put one hand in front of his face so that he could open his eyes a little but it felt like a large rock had blown in his left eye now. He turned around and bent over, trying to get it out, resisting the urge to curl up in a ball and cry. He rose and moved forward again, and now he simply walked with his eyes closed against the wind and the things it was blowing at him. He still held his wand in his right hand, and now he felt blindly along the wall with his left, his mouth clamped shut, his eyes threatening to be permanently sealed.

At length, he felt the wind lessen, and he finally dared to open his eyes a crack. He found himself at the entrance to the Slytherin common room. The air was still. He looked nervously at his sister. She gazed back impassively.

"What now?" he finally asked.

She nodded at the wall, which, when Harry lived here, would slide open any time you said the blood-laden password. Was that what he needed to do? Come up with a password? He looked searchingly at her.

"What do you choose?" she asked.

"What do I choose?" he said, incredulous. "I only have one thing left, don't I?"

She did not seem to have heard him. "I cannot enter; it is not my realm. This is where I leave you. Good bye, Harry Potter."

He remembered the words of the centaur in his first year, but unlike Firenze, she did not tell him that he was now safe. If anything, he felt like

he was the least safe he had been since he'd begun going through the seven gates.

He did not think he had blinked, but suddenly she disappeared completely and utterly. No house-elf *pops* or *cracks*. No nothing. He turned to the gate. He moved his left hand over the wall; it seemed to be completely solid and unyielding. He looked down. *When you were born, how many articles of clothing were you wearing?*

He sighed; he knew what he had to do. Even as he was dreading the onslaught of some new and even more horrible torture designed to make him sorry he was doing this, he removed his last article of clothing and stood before the gate, as naked as the day he was born.

The wall silently opened.

He stepped inside, his left hand providing him with a modicum of coverage, his right arm extended, his wand ready. But here was where the similarity to Hogwarts castle ended. He was not in the Slytherin common room. He was in a cavernous space like a cathedral, with tall columns that flared like lotuses at the top, and an oblique light filtering in from some very high, unseen source. *It was the temple in his dreams.* Turquoise and black and white and red tiles swirled in complicated patterns on the floor; a large throne elaborately carved from an unidentifiable type of stone sat in the middle of the space. And on one of the columns near the throne —

Harry gasped. It was Draco Malfoy, also without a stitch of clothing, looking like his body was hanging from a *hook*. He still appeared to be dead.

Suddenly the throne was no longer empty. A woman appeared out of nowhere, with no noise to announce her. Harry held his hand over his genitals very carefully.

It was his mother.

Her long red hair looked as he remembered it, her unlined face and sparkling green eyes, her smooth skin and wide smile. He swallowed and lifted his face to her.

"Hello, Harry", she said calmly, in his mother's voice.

"*Mum?*" he whispered after a half-minute's silence.

"Of course not. I am Ereshkigal, queen of this realm. But you associate your mother with death, so this is how I appear to you."

"I — I associate my mother with death?"

"You must. More than any other single person. Or else I would not appear to be her. It is your mind which is seeing me like this. I cannot even see myself as you see me; I cannot see through your eyes."

Harry grimaced. "Well, right now I can't see awfully well, either. I gave up my glasses."

"You do not need to see with your physical eyes here. You need to see with your Inner Eye."

He didn't stop grimacing. "You sound like Trelawney."

"I know who you mean. You do not seem to understand the difference between a person who sees imperfectly but who knows how they *ought* to see, and a person who sees perfectly, but does not *know* that it is right."

"What?"

She smiled indulgently; it was unnerving, because the only time his mother ever smiled at him like this was just before he had killed her. "Why are you here, Harry?"

He took a breath; what would be required of him? What price would he have to pay to save Draco Malfoy?

"I'm here to save my friend."

She looked stern. "I do no favors here; and I do not parley nor deal with those who do not speak true."

"How did I not speak true? That's why I'm here." Harry was starting to get frustrated; he was also feeling at a distinct disadvantage, in that it felt to him like he was standing completely naked in front of his mother, with no coverage but his hands and his wand.

"You called him your friend."

Harry drew his mouth into a line. "Well, it's true in a way. It's partially true. He's — many things. That's one of them."

"He is also your enemy."

Harry nodded, acknowledging the truth of this. "Yes, he's that too, sometimes."

She returned to her throne and sat languidly, like a cat, with one leg tucked under her. "So. How very extraordinary. You came here to save your *enemy*."

"Is that permitted?"

She shrugged. "As long as you are truthful about it and you are willing to pay the price, anything is permitted. I just find it extraordinary. Very few living people, like you, have ever come here to ask for someone's life

to be restored. But of the people who have asked, it was always a dead child or parent, a lover or dearest friend. You are the first to ask for the life of an *enemy* to be restored."

"As I said, he's many things. He's — he's a hero."

She nodded sagely. "I know. He took another person's death for her; the woman you love."

"Yes."

"He also loved her; that was why he was willing to die."

"Yes", he said again.

"Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength; loving someone deeply gives you courage. A man from China said that. Lao-Tzu. He lived long after the people who placed me here in this realm..."

Harry shrugged. "Never heard of him."

"I know."

Silence.

"And what do you plan to give me in exchange for this friend, this enemy, this hero who loves the same woman you do and was willing to die for her?"

Harry swallowed; he had thought about it when he was performing the spell, but with every gate he passed through, he was growing less and less sure. And now he wondered — what would the *real* cost be? What strange new world would he be unleashing by doing this?

"Um, first I have a question."

"Yes?"

"If I do whatever it takes to restore his life, will that also bring back Voldemort?"

"I did not say that you could restore two lives. Only one. Perhaps. That still remains to be seen."

"No, I mean will it bring him back because Draco's sacrifice wouldn't have taken place? I don't want to do that again..."

"Why do you think his sacrifice wouldn't have taken place if you restore his life?"

Harry was confused. "Well, erm — because", he said lamely. He started to feel hopeful. "You mean it won't?"

"If you wish to know whether success will mean changing time, no it will not. Nothing that has happened in the past will have happened any differently. So, I ask again: what do you have to offer me?"

He still felt perplexed about this, even as he felt enormous relief flood through him. *No changing time*, he thought. *Good*. He looked at Draco, his throat tight. Knowing that Voldemort would remain dead and gone, he had no more obstacles before him, nothing to deter him. He *had* to do this. It was only right. It should have been *him*. He was the one who should have died. Voldemort had been after him for years and years; he knew what he had to do. He tried to forget Sandy's words just before he cast the spell. That was never to be...

But he had no sooner opened his mouth than she was pacing back and forth before the throne, her brow furrowed, her arms folded against her chest as she walked.

"Let me tell you a story, Harry", she said, as though she hadn't just been waiting almost ten minutes for an answer to her question.

"Once upon a time, a little girl found out that she was to become a big sister. Her mother gave birth to a little brother, but he was sickly and died. The baby died, in fact, when the little girl was holding him, rocking him to sleep. He had been sick, and finally could hold on to life no more. As she sat there cradling the baby in her arms, she said, 'It should have been me. Why wasn't it me? Oh, Death, please take me instead!'

"But Death did not take her; Death had taken the babe and gone.

"And when the girl became a woman, she married and she and her husband had children. The first time, they had twins, both girls. But one of them was smaller than the other and had had the umbilicus wrapped around her throat during the delivery; she died soon after, and the other girl, her twin, lived her life always feeling that a part of her was missing, because her sister had only lived for a few minutes and now dwelt in the Realm of the Dead. And whenever her mother saw how she mourned for her dead twin, the mother thought, 'Why wasn't it me? Oh, Death, I wish you had taken me instead!' She said this even though it would have meant her twin daughters growing up without a mother.

"But, of course, Death did not take her when she said this. Death had taken the other twin and was long gone...

"And when her daughter grew up and became a woman and married and had a child, she was overjoyed to be a grandmother. She played with her little granddaughter and held her tightly and read to her and let her know how much she was loved.

"And when her dear heart, her little granddaughter, became very ill and was dying, her grandmother held her as the life slipped out of her. Then, holding the cold corpse of her granddaughter, she said, 'It should have been me! Why wasn't it me? O, Death! Take me instead and return her to this world!'

"But Death did not do this."

She stopped her pacing and gazed expectantly at Harry. "Can you tell me why?"

Harry furrowed his brow. He thought for a while, then said, "Well, I reckon that's just not how it works. You can't just watch someone die and then say, 'Oh, by the way, I'm willing to go, so take me instead'."

She nodded. "That is true. But *why* is it true?"

Harry stared at her. Good question. Why was it true? He wracked his brain, but could think of nothing.

"Jamie — my sister — I mean, Tiamat — she said it was possible to save Draco. Are you saying now that it's not?"

"Of course not. What else have you been told, about the others who have tried to do this?"

"Well, just that they weren't willing to do what was necessary."

She nodded. *Willing*. There it was again.

Tempus Bonae Voluntatis.

"But if a person is willing give up their life for someone else —"

"Then it is no sacrifice to them. How much of a sacrifice is it, for an old woman to say, 'Take me instead of this child?' How much of a sacrifice is it for someone suffering from grief and guilt to say the same? Do they feel they have a good life? Not at the moment. Do they feel it would be a sacrifice to give up that life to save the one they love? Not at all."

"So", Harry said slowly, comprehension starting to dawn on him. "I have to give up something that I really don't want to give up?"

"Do you know the meaning of the word 'sacrifice'?"

He swallowed, shaking his head.

"It means, 'to make holy, to sanctify'. In practice, it means to cut away something. The pain is merely implied, but it is a necessary aspect of the sacrifice. Humans have watered down their sacrifices after so many thousands of years. Now a 'sacrifice' is giving away one percent of their income, or putting some coins in the hat of a street performer. A sacrifice is supposed to *hurt*."

Harry frowned. "The fact that I'm here — does that mean that humans should have gone on worshipping you and Tiamat and Apsu, the ancient Sumerian gods? That they should have gone on sacrificing animals to you? Or did you require human sacrifice?"

She smiled indulgently, as though he were an amusing but ignorant five-year-old. "What is the purpose of religion, Harry?"

He was startled; he'd never really thought much about it. "Well, I suppose to teach humans how to live. Rules for right and wrong. How to treat each other."

She shrugged. "It has been useful for those things. But many people who believe in no deity have the ability to make these rules for themselves. They see no need to attribute such rules to a divine source. There are many, many human laws that serve this purpose as well, laws that have no connection to a faith. Religion does serve that purpose; but if it were to disappear, human society would not break down into anarchy. There would still be the law."

"Well — many religions have creation stories —"

She nodded. "Yes. And they can be very revealing. But now humans also have more concrete scientific information about where they come from and how the world began. You said *Enuma Elish* when you cast your spell; do you know what that means?"

He nodded. "It means, 'In the beginning'. It's the beginning of a great creation epic."

"And why was it so familiar to the people?"

He thought back to something Ruth had told him when she'd been explaining the theory behind the spell. "Well — it was read every year during the New Year's celebration."

"What purpose does that serve?"

Harry frowned; what purpose *did* that serve? "Well, I guess it was a ritual. Everyone knew to expect it every year..."

"It reminded them of who they were." She spoke more softly now. "Every human culture is so tenuous, Harry. You have no idea. The recitation of a creation story may seem to have something to do with religion, but a ritual like this is a *binding*, a way to remind everyone in the culture who they are and where they belong. Can you think of any similar things that don't have to do with religion?"

"Well — when I was young, before I went to Hogwarts, there was Bonfire Day."

She smiled. "Yes. The primordial draw of fire. The patriotic feeling of hanging a traitor in effigy. Patriotism, too, is a kind of religion, you know."

He'd thought of something else. "Hermione told me something — in my other life. She used to live in Philadelphia, in America. Every year on the Fourth of July, someone would read the Declaration of Independence aloud at this place — um — Independence Hall. That's it. She said she'd never heard Americans be so quiet as when that was being read, and never so noisy as when they were cheering afterward..."

She smiled. "Different country, same phenomenon. You understand, I think."

"But", he said, "with religion, there's also usually something about what happens to you after you die." He looked around, keeping his hand covering himself carefully. "I guess they're all a bit off about that."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I've heard about things like tunnels of light, and St. Peter standing at a gate with a checklist, and people who've died briefly and been brought back talking about actually feeling fire, heat, as though they'd been in hell briefly. This isn't like any of those things."

"But you did not invoke a god associated with a belief system that includes an afterworld like that."

"What?"

"You invoked this afterworld with your spell. You see, Harry, the reason why there are so very many types of religion in the world is that there are so many different types of people. Almost everyone has a religious impulse of some sort, and there is a religion for just about everyone. When humans die, they see exactly what they expect to see. If a person expects to see St. Peter with a clipboard or a computer, standing beside twelve-foot high golden gates on a white fluffy cloud, that is exactly what they will see. If they expect to be in a sunlit field with blooming wildflowers, that is what they will see."

"What?" he said again.

"This is all in your mind, Harry. Humans are highly suggestible. Of course, it has been drawn to your attention that you are unusually suggestible even among wizards, who have this quality in greater quantity than non-magical people, or they would not be able to execute their spells."

I meant what I said; everyone who dies sees exactly what they expect to see. They encounter the god in which they believe, if they believe in a god, and if they don't, and expect to disappear utterly into oblivion, that is what happens to them. If they believe in reincarnation, they will begin a new life. If they expect to become a starfish, they will. But they have to *truly* believe it. If a person goes through the motions of adhering to a religion all his life, but that person does not truly believe that anything will happen after death other than oblivion, then he will die and immediately disappear into oblivion. However much time that person may have spent going to his church or temple or mosque, because he did not truly believe, he did not *really* expect to see the afterworld taught by his religion.

"Human consciousness does not disappear when the heart stops and there is no longer oxygen going to the brain. It simply moves on to a different realm..."

"*The next great adventure...*" Harry murmured. She didn't seem to notice.

"There *are* those who are restless and rebellious, who insist that they have business to finish — those people become ghosts. But most humans are actually quite good at letting go of the world; better than they think they will be before they die."

"But then — why do some people who die and are revived say they were suffering in hell? Wouldn't you want to imagine yourself in heaven?"

"Ah, but once humans die, their self-perception is no longer clouded. Here and there, a very rare person sees himself as he really is during his life, but most people cannot see themselves clearly until after death. Then they know themselves completely and utterly. They are no longer capable of deluding themselves. If someone adheres to a belief system that includes specific types of afterlife punishments for certain types of actions during life, then, when they die and see themselves for what they are, if they did those things, they will expect to be punished for those deeds. I said that humans who die see exactly what they *expect* to see. I did not say that they see what they *want* to see. That is different."

"And sometimes what we want is the thing that is absolutely the worst thing for us..." he said softly, remembering what Dumbledore had said about the Mirror of Erised.

"That is true."

He frowned in thought. *I wonder what Draco is seeing right now? I wonder what he expected to see after his death?*

"So, from what you said, I can't just say, 'Take me instead of him'. It's not a sacrifice to me, then; it's not good enough."

"What do you think?" She looked at him, unblinking.

"I think I'm right. But that still leaves the question of *what* exactly is necessary? Will you tell me, and I'll decide whether to give it up? Or do I have to work it out myself?"

"Why don't you try to work it out first?"

He sighed; it wasn't easy to think clearly without his glasses. When the whole world looked so fuzzy to him, he felt like his thinking was fuzzy, too. He thought for a while; she waited patiently. He held his right hand with his wand in front of his groin now and moved his left hand up to his basilisk pendent and held it; a calmness flowed through him, as it always did when he touched it. It occurred to him suddenly that he could have given this up and kept his glasses; but suddenly, he was glad he had not done that. It was odd not to be able to see Ginny when he clutched it, but then, she was in a different world than he was now.

"You mentioned that you know that Draco loves Ginny too, that we both love her. Do I — do I have to give up Ginny? If he comes back, I have to let him have her?"

"Hmph! How would she feel about you talking about her that way?"

He grimaced. "She probably wouldn't be thrilled..."

She nodded. "She isn't yours to give. That would hurt, but you would hurt *her* as much as you. She loves you; this isn't meant to be *her* sacrifice. This is yours."

He wracked his brain some more; his arms were stiff from holding them in front of his groin for so long; he ached to whirl them around in a windmill, but he somehow felt that would be disrespectful to the queen of the Realm of the Dead, who also happened to look exactly like his mother. What else could he give up? He couldn't trade his life for Draco's, he couldn't give up Ginny since he didn't own her; what else could he do?

"I could see you when you were passing through the gates", she told him now. "You did well with all of them. Well, almost all of them. At one point I thought you would turn and run, change your mind..."

Harry furrowed his brow. "Are you trying to give me a clue?"

"Yes."

He thought about the gates, about giving up each thing he'd been wearing, about how the moment he did, something happened that made him very, very sorry he no longer had the item he'd sacrificed in order to move on. He had progressively made himself more and more vulnerable. Which test had been the hardest? And how would that tell him what his sacrifice should be?

The minutes ticked by; and yet, he wasn't completely certain that time ever really passed in this place. It was utterly still. The light didn't seem to come from any source, such as candles, which would eventually burn down, nor lamps, which would eventually run out of oil. There weren't even any magical candles that would never drip wax or burn down...

Suddenly, he opened his eyes very wide. He knew what the sacrifice should be. His heart felt like it would break. *No, he thought, not that, anything but that...*

He fell to his knees, forgetting to cover himself; then he curled in a ball on the floor, his knees drawn up to his chest. How could he give that up? How could he go on? But then he looked through his tears at the body of Draco Malfoy, hanging on the column near the throne. He thought of Draco's face when he had thrown himself in front of Ginny, when he had taken the brunt of the curse that was meant for her. He did that, even though he knew Ginny loved Harry, even though his love for her was not returned... He had never meant for her to be dragged to Godric's Hollow with Ron. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen...

And even though this young man had nearly caused him, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione to be killed, it was also because of his love for Ginny that Voldemort was no more; Harry could see with perfect clarity the green light speeding its way toward Ginny, Draco's body at her feet; he could see the light rebounding from what seemed to be a kind of invisible shield around her body, traveling back to the tall, thin wizard, back into his wand, the impact draining the life out of him, leaving him an empty shell.

Harry sat up, wiping the tears away from his eyes. He knew what he had to do, and that it was the right thing to do. His sacrifice would be nothing compared to Draco's. How could he not do this? How could he begrudge Draco this when the world was rid of Voldemort because of what he did?

He looked up at his mother's face, which was also *not* his mother's face. She looked like she knew what he was thinking.

"You know what I'm thinking, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Am I right? Is this what will do it, what will bring him back?"

"Do you think it is enough?"

"I'd — I'd rather die than —" But he didn't finish. That spoken thought had said it all. It was the last thing in the world he could imagine living without. And therefore, it was the only acceptable sacrifice.

She nodded, and held out her hand.

* * *

There was a rushing sound in his ears, as if he were caught in a wind tunnel. He was made of wind, he was nothing but rushing air. The sound grew louder and louder, until it almost had a *whistling* tone to it, it was resonating with his body and with the world. It felt like everything in the world was vibrating at exactly the same speed, completely in sync, and the wind rushed on and on and on and on...

Then suddenly, everything was still.

He was aware of being on a grassy surface. The wind was moving his hair and he was lying on his side. Someone was up against him. Warmth emanated from the other body. He reached out and touched the other person, feeling smooth skin, a nose, a mouth, eyes...

"Ow! Get your finger out of my eye, Potter!"

Harry jerked his hand back. He was starting to hear other sounds; cries and moans, people in pain, people shocked and frightened. Harry shook his head, still feeling like his thinking was a bit fuzzy. Had that been Malfoy's voice? It certainly sounded like it. Harry tried opening his eyes as wide as he could, then closing them again, squeezing them tightly shut. Then he opened them once more. Nothing but blackness. Why was it so dark? How long had he been in the Realm of the Dead? It must be the middle of the night.

Then he heard pounding feet and felt the ground under him shake as they drew nearer.

"Harry! Harry, you're all right!" That was Ron.

"Harry! What happened?" Always wanting to know things; that was Hermione. Despite Ron's longer legs, she reached him first, sinking onto the ground and throwing her arms around him. He clutched at her, his fingers in her short curls, he felt wetness on her soft cheek next to his. *She's all right*, he thought. *She and Ron are all right.*

And then his other best friend pulled him forward in a bear hug, slapping his back. He was suddenly aware that he had his clothes on again. "Harry, we were certain that — well that you were just *gone*..."

Then the voice he'd really been waiting for.

"*Harry!*"

"*Ginny!*" he cried, his head whipping around in the direction of her voice. He staggered to his feet, and then she was in his arms, her warm body pressed against his, his mouth on hers for only a moment before he buried his face in her hair, unable to contain his relief and happiness that she was all right.

He felt Ginny pull away from him a little and take his hands in hers. "I never thought I'd see you again! And —"

He wasn't sure why she'd stopped; then he heard her gasp and he heard the impact of two bodies nearby as she cried out, "*Draco!* You're alive!"

Harry heard Draco Malfoy's strangled voice saying, "Not for long, if you keep that up, Ginny." He heard them disconnect and she put her arms around Harry again.

"You — you brought him back! How — how on earth did you do it?"

Then he frowned, realizing that something was wrong. "It's so dark. I can't see any of you. How can you see me? How could you see Malfoy?" He clutched his wand tightly; somehow the blackness around him seemed so impenetrable he wasn't convinced that lighting his wand would do any good at all.

There was an awkward pause. Then he heard Hermione say, "What do you mean, dark? It's broad daylight, Harry. You and Malfoy were gone for quite a while, yes. For hours and hours. But it won't be dark for ages yet. You can't see a thing?"

He shook his head. "Not a speck of light." His voice quivered.

He was blind.

Shadows

Harry put his hands up to his face, under his glasses; from what he could tell, he still had his eyes. They were just absolutely useless. "Do I — do I still look the same?" His voice shook.

"Yeah", Ron said, his voice also shaking. "Same green eyes. In fact, you're looking right at me. I mean — they're pointed in my direction. Seems like you ought to be able to see as well as you ever did."

Harry heard Draco stagger to his feet with more than a little grunting. "What happened?" Draco wanted to know. "I remember — I remember the curse hitting me... And then I was — well, anyway, now I'm *not*. I wake up and I'm lying here with a gaggle of Gryffindors hanging over me, and Potter's *blind*? Are you sure we're not *all* dead? Because I certainly should be, after what I remember..."

"No, we're not *all* dead, Malfoy", Hermione said, her voice bitter. "I would have stopped him if I could have, but from what I could see, Harry did a spell from this book he has about snake magic. He took your body with him and he's been gone for hours. Now he comes back with *you* alive, but *he* seems to be blind." She paused, and when she spoke again, there was awe in her voice. "What happened, Harry? Where did you go?"

Harry swallowed. "I went someplace... someplace where you have the opportunity to do something to bring the other person back from the dead. The opportunity to make a sacrifice. The spell doesn't do it; the sacrifice does."

"But Harry", Ron said, his voice catching, "you gave up your *sight* to save Malfoy? How could *any* sacrifice be worth *his* life? After what he did, handing me over to that madman? Nearly getting us all killed?" Ron sounded as bitter as Hermione.

Harry tightened his grip around Ginny and felt her lean her head on his shoulder. "But you *weren't* killed", he said. "Nor Hermione. Nor — nor Ginny. He saved her. And then when Riddle tried to kill her —" He put his hand out to her face, tentatively, tracing her cheek with his fingers, finding her nose and following it up to her forehead, where he found exactly what he expected. He pushed her hair out of the way, off her brow so they could see what his fingers had already found.

"Look," he told them, realizing a moment later how odd this must be coming from him. He heard them gasp and knew that they were seeing the already-healing wound that he could trace delicately with his fingers. "You'll most likely have a scar there, Ginny", he whispered to her.

He felt her arm move up as she touched her own forehead with her fingers. She was shaking. "Oh, Harry —"

He pulled her into his arms again, and this time, when he found her mouth with his, he didn't let her go immediately; her arms went around his neck, her fingers into his hair. He felt the utter freedom of not knowing or caring what was going on around him, whether a half-dozen or a hundred people might be gawping at them and staring...

But finally, he felt her pull away, and he hadn't known it was possible before, but he thought he could practically *hear* Ginny blushing. It was in her voice.

"Harry... There'll be time for that later..."

He grinned at her and laughed. "Is that a promise?" She, however, sounded quite somber.

"W-well, yes, of course, but — but there are some things you should know..."

He didn't like the sound of that and no longer felt like laughing. He turned again to where he thought Ron and Hermione were. "It — it seems a bit quiet. What's happened since I've been gone?"

He heard Ron take a deep breath. "Well, after you disappeared, the tide really turned. That spell of yours rather caught the Death Eaters' attention, plus they couldn't attack the Aurors and others because of the gold dome. By the way, thanks for warning me about the phoenix song, Harry", he intoned sarcastically. "Thought I was going to go *deaf* from it."

Harry grimaced and mumbled, "Sorry", before Ron continued.

"Well, anyway, when some of them saw what you'd done, *and* found that they couldn't get through the dome, they just started surrendering, throwing down their wands. It seemed that some of them were trying to Apparate away, but the dome was emitting some kind of interference so they couldn't. And the werewolves couldn't Apparate, of course, so they tried running off, but our people stunned them. Some of the Death Eaters have been claiming that they were under Imperius, naturally. Finally, Ginny and I couldn't take holding onto the wands anymore —"

"— you mean *I* couldn't hold on anymore", Ginny said, not sounding hurt so much as wanting to tell the truth. "You don't have to share the blame, Ron —"

"There's no shame in not being able to go on like that, Gin", Ron said stoutly. "I can't believe you held on as long as you did. My bleeding arms felt like they were going to drop off my body. Anyway, after we broke the link", he told Harry, "some of the Death Eaters *still* fought on — stubborn sods — but they were horribly outnumbered by then and easy to catch. We've also been dealing with some fakers who've been pretending to lie still so we'd think they were out of it, and then trying to get us when our backs are turned while sorting through the dead and wounded. Those were mostly werewolves who pretended to be hit with stunners. I think some of them, when they saw what was happening to the others, took a dive for the ground and pretended to be out. One of them even kicked Hermione in the jaw, but she really shocked her by turning into a wolf herself." He gave a half-hearted laugh for a moment. "It was easy for me to stun the werewolf after Hermione's performance." He gave a deep sigh, no longer sounding like laughing. "It's all been over for hours now. We've definitely won."

Harry heaved a sigh of relief. "I — I hoped you'd be all right. It *looked* like you were going to be all right, when I left." He remembered the odd sight of Ginny and Ron floating through the air, linked by the identical wands; he remembered enlarging Sandy, casting the spell...

"Sandy!" he said suddenly. "Where is she? Is she all right?"

"I am here, Harry Potter", he heard the still-deep voice say. He turned toward her voice, uncertain whether he was correct.

"Can someone take the engorgement charm off her?" he asked. He heard Hermione's voice utter the incantation and then felt her place the small pebbly body in his hands, but something seemed to be wrong.

"Sandy?" he asked, uncertain.

"I am here, Harry Potter", she said again, her voice sounding normal to him once more, except that she seemed very weary. He had never thought to hear her speak again.

"Are you all right, Sandy?" he asked her.

"I think she'll be all right, Harry", Ginny said softly; as he stroked Sandy, he could feel Ginny's fingers on her also. "I think the spell took something out of her. Perhaps when we get back to Hogwarts —"

"Hagrid'll be able to see to her", he said confidently. "He knows all about snakes." He switched to Parseltongue, saying to her, "You'll be right as rain once Hagrid has seen you, Sandy."

"Erm", Ron began. "See, Harry, the thing is, we're doing a lot better here than they are at Hogwarts —"

Hogwarts. "What about Hogwarts? What happened?" Harry's heart had leapt into his throat.

He heard Ron's hesitation. "Well, see, it's been a little hard to piece together, because all of Voldemort's top people are gone." Harry felt himself grinning; Ron had said it: *Voldemort*, with no hesitation or shaking in his voice. "Wormtail might have known about the whole plan, but — well, we can't very well ask him now..." Harry swallowed, seeing again the small man's rat-like features as he looked defiantly at his Master and refused the order to continue torturing Ron. He guessed that Ron was probably also thinking of this, from the way his voice had trailed off.

"You could try asking *me*, Weasley", drawled the maddeningly superior voice.

"And why should I ask you anything, you traitor? Harry's sight wasn't worth your life, I can tell you that!"

"Ron!" Harry said sharply. He turned in the direction of Draco's voice. "When you were trying to warn Ginny — what did you think was going to happen? What had he told you?" He tried to keep the quiver out of his voice but was annoyed to hear it anyway.

Draco Malfoy took a deep breath. "Okay, this was the plan as far as I knew. He wanted to bring both Weasley and Granger here, your two best friends. He asked me whether you had a girlfriend, but it was just a question, not a direct order to tell him whether you had a girlfriend, so I was able to lie to him. He wasn't always very careful about that, but I always made sure I noticed the way he asked me things so I could work out what my response should be. Couldn't be too careful. I'm the one who suggested to him that Granger be left behind, since she can Apparate. I convinced him that Weasley's werewolf strength and all that would make him a good choice, and I pointed out that he wouldn't be able to escape by Apparating. And then he'd be trapped here when the Death Eaters were summoned and the werewolves showed up."

"*A good choice.* Yeah, for being tortured and healing myself up again to get ready for more. Thanks ever so much for that, Malfoy. Next time I

know of a dark wizard looking for pasty little ferrets to torture, I'll be sure to recommend *you*, to return the favor", Ron snarled.

"I *was* doing you a bleeding favor, Weasley!" Draco shot back. "Why do you think I tried to convince him to leave Granger out of it? Oh, don't rush to thank me or anything, either one of you. And I *thought* that maybe, just maybe, you'd be strong enough to escape, Weasley. Or do him some damage before he summoned the others. I couldn't hurt him so I was trying to get someone here who might be able to. You may think I'm stupid, but I *know* you are if you couldn't work this out for yourself."

"Thank you for trying to protect Hermione", Harry said firmly, suspecting that neither Ron nor Hermione would ever say this. "But — when you were on the tower this morning, ready to fly off on your broom, what did you say to Ginny?"

"It wasn't what he said", Ginny whispered. "It's what he *couldn't* say..."

"Right", Draco confirmed. "Bloody bastard had told me I couldn't say or write a word about any of this to anyone, and I agreed, since I knew that refusing wouldn't do me any good. If I'd died for refusing that would just mean I wouldn't be alive to find a way to work around the order. So I tried just talking to Ginny about the testing. I asked her whether she was going to be down there. She said she was planning to. I showed her that I had my broom with me, and she started going off on me about disrupting the tests. I told her that was the last thing I had in mind, and she started to catch on that allowing the test to go on could be what was dangerous. I also told her that anyone who was smart would do what I was about to do, and I flew off, hoping she'd understand that I meant that she and everyone else should just leave the castle."

"*Leave the castle?*" Harry said in confusion. "Not just avoid touching the plow?"

"Harry —" Hermione started to say, hesitating. "You see, Harry, it seems that the plan was to bring Ron here, you'd see him tortured through your scar and convince Dumbledore to come here with you and others to try to fight for Ron, but — but in the meantime, there were other forces in position to attack the castle. He wanted to do it while you and Dumbledore were *here*, preoccupied with rescuing Ron..."

"*Attack the castle!*"

"Right", Draco agreed. "See, you weren't supposed to come here with Weasley. You and Dumbledore were supposed to get a force together to

come rescue him, leaving the castle in the hands of the younger students and the teachers who don't do much fighting. I reckoned you'd send the elves and people like Flitwick and McGonagall — which is just what Granger did instead — and I thought I saw some people from the Dueling Club as well. Dumbledore was supposed to be here. The Dark Lord was counting on it. But that wasn't the only thing that didn't go according to plan..."

"What happened, Hermione?" Harry whispered to her.

"Well, when I left here, I went straight to the Ministry. I knew Katie was working and she and I went to Eustace Bean in Magical Law Enforcement. He called up all of the available Aurors and sent them here. Then I Apparated to Hogsmeade and ran to the castle as a wolf. But I could already see, when I was running toward the gates —" She choked on a sob.

"*What?*" Harry demanded, clutching Ginny around the middle so tightly she let out a little squeak; he relaxed his grip.

"Well, it was chaos", she said, tears in her voice. "The giants were —"

"*Giants!*"

"Yes", she whispered. "Giants. Remember when Hagrid's mum was living in the forest with her friends? How she said only a few of them were interested in what Hagrid and Madame Maxime had to say, when he visited them? The rest were visited by Death Eaters last year, evidently, and they agreed to join — join Voldemort. They've been waiting in the forest for his signal."

"*They've been in the forest?*" He was shaking, wishing he had still been in the habit of flying with Ginny over the trees, where he might have seen the giants. He might have been able to alert Dumbledore to their presence...

"Some Death Eaters were staying with them. They had a way to communicate with Voldemort, and they were able to use magic to keep the giants from being seen or heard. And — and they were also in contact with some students who were sort of angling to be Death Eaters as well. That's how they kept track of what was happening in the castle."

"Who?" Harry demanded, shaking with fury.

He heard Draco Malfoy snort. "You have to ask? I can tell you: Zabini, Nott, Crabbe, Goyle and Parkinson. And they'll claim to have been under Imperius, all of them. You watch. Er, so to speak", he added awkwardly. Harry grimaced; people were going to be doing a lot of that, he expected.

"Did you know about the giants in the forest, too?" he asked Draco, his voice shaking with barely-controlled rage.

"No, not exactly. I know the five of them were up to something, but the Dark Lord had ordered me to leave them alone..." He sounded more than a little embarrassed and Harry again silently cursed the Obedience Charm.

Hermione went on with her story. "From the castle drive, I could see smoke coming from two of the towers — Trelawney's and the Astronomy Tower", Hermione continued. "When I went round the castle, I could see that they were both being pulled down from the bottom. The giants were destroying them with their bare hands. They couldn't reach the tops, of course, but that doesn't matter if you can just tear into them from the bottom up... Trelawney was still in her tower", Hermione added; "you know she almost never leaves it..." Harry could hear her crying. He'd never thought to hear Hermione cry over Professor Trelawney.

"Let's hope she didn't see it coming", he whispered, not sure what to say. Trelawney had always looked as delicate and insubstantial as a dragonfly, and now she was just — gone.

"Oh, but she did", Hermione said, trying to compose herself again. "Maggie said, afterward, when I went back, after the battle was over here. Poor Maggie! She's been kicking herself over it. According to her, Professor Trelawney *did* see this coming. Her death, that is. Maggie said that Trelawney told her, 'The reason I stay in my tower is that this will be my tomb. I have already foreseen my death; this is where I shall both live and die...' She didn't have a specific time; she had simply seen herself dying in her tower. Maggie reckoned she just didn't want to lose face in front of her new assistant." She sniffed. "To think, she *knew* she was going to die there and she stayed, instead of trying to get far away. And I called her an old fraud so many times..." She sounded truly contrite.

Harry swallowed. "Well, when I was in third year, she knew that Wormtail was going to return to Voldemort", he said softly, realizing a moment later that this wasn't really a comforting thought.

Ron cleared his throat and from the rustling of robes, Harry thought he was perhaps enfolding Hermione in his arms. Harry had the idea that she might not be able to speak again for a few minutes. "Anyway, when Hermione ran around the castle that's where she found the battle proper going on", Ron said, speaking for her. "Maggie was the first person she found; Snape had her shelter under the Whomping Willow with some of

the younger students; she hasn't learned much about dueling yet and doesn't have a broom. As she's not a kid, he reckoned she could calm the first and second years. They stayed squashed in the tunnel so Maggie could see what was going on and she could still be near them."

"Well, really, Angelina was the first one I found. She was unconscious, near the tree. I think it hit her. I could see Maggie's face and others through the tree roots", Hermione managed to say through her tears; "I dragged Angelina along when I went in to speak with her, so she wouldn't be trod on by one of the giants. I got inside it and started the tree moving again just as a giant was heading for us... Maggie told me what happened after we all were brought here by the Portkey."

Hermione broke into what sounded like fresh sobs and Ginny clutched at Harry again while Ron continued for her once more. "After the four of us disappeared with the plow, there was a bit of an uproar, of course. Snape ran up to the castle to see Dumbledore while Hagrid tried to calm down everyone who was at the tests. But before he even reached Dumbledore's office, Snape ran into him coming down the stairs, running like he'd never seen him. Dumbledore already knew something was wrong and that he needed to get down to the paddock. Remus was with him; as they went down the stairs, he gave Snape the short version of why he'd come.

"Remus had been telling Dumbledore that the work he'd been doing infiltrating a secret society of werewolves had paid off. He learned that they had all been given Portkeys that were going to activate at nine-thirty this morning, that they were going to be called upon to fight for their `master'. Remus had managed to get one of the Portkeys. So Snape told them *his* news of what had just happened down at the testing, and Remus reckoned that that was what the werewolves were supposed to do — attack one of their own, me. Except that all four of us had been taken along. Dumbledore was certain that Voldemort would be upset about it not going according to plan."

"And then", Hermione choked, "while they were all waiting down by the paddock for some word from Professor Snape, Maggie said that she had one of her `feelings' and told everyone to run away from the forest. Well, the Weasleys knew better than to ignore her, but the other seventh year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws don't really know what Maggie can do — Trelawney didn't exactly give most of the students much faith in Divination — so they were still milling about with Hagrid. He was trying

to control the bulls, who weren't yoked to anything anymore once the plow had left. A moment later, the ground started to shake and Maggie and the other Weasleys looked behind them, finding that the others hadn't followed, and now there were *giants* coming out of the forest. About a dozen of them", she said, her voice shaking. Harry remembered how she had trembled from being picked up by Hagrid's mum, a *friendly* giant.

"So", Harry whispered, "they just —"

"Oh, the others ran once they saw *that*." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Not that it was much good by then, for some of them..."

Harry had a feeling he was going to hear about it sooner or later, so he decided sooner was better. "Who?" he choked.

"Well, some of the giants went right up to the castle and started pulling down Trelawney's tower; the first thing the others did was to pick up the sun-bulls and start throwing them at people. Those — those horns are lethal —"

"Who?" he demanded again; Ginny clutched him tighter.

"Parvati", she whispered; Harry heard Ron sniff. He already knew, Harry realized. "And her sister, too. And Seamus. Maggie and Angelina were already running for the castle, to find Professor Snape. Professor Dumbledore told them to get all of the younger students they could find, and Sam had Percy, Nita, George and Fred follow him to the broom shed; after taking some for themselves, they also got brooms to Dean and Neville, who were trying to cast spells on the giants from the ground and avoid being trod on or picked up and pulled to pieces. Once they were all up in the air, flying over the giants, they were able to cast spells from a safe distance, although it's harder to aim like that, and Dean flew too close to one of the giants. He was thrown right through one of the library windows..."

"From the *paddock*?" Harry gasped.

"Yeah", Ron said, his voice grim. "He's very bad, but Madam Pomfrey said he'll be on the road to recovery in a few days — he was cut to ribbons by the glass and has concussion and internal bleeding..."

"They got some of the other Ravenclaws, too, who were there for the testing", Hermione added. "Mandy Brocklehurst. Terry Boot. Neville managed to bring Parvati's body back to the castle, though", she said, sobbing softly. "The — the really horrible part for everyone has been

collecting the — the bits of the people who were dismembered —" She couldn't go on. Harry felt ill.

"Bloody hell", he heard Draco Malfoy say softly.

Harry pictured the faces of his fellow students, now dead. So many. So *many!* And yet, he had a feeling that it was just the tip of the iceberg.

"So Neville's all right?" he whispered.

"Oh, Neville was brilliant!" Hermione said, a happy note in her voice again at last. "He flew like — well, like *you*, Harry. Maybe it was the potion he used to take his tests, I don't know. The giants were so annoyed by him. He, George, Nita and Percy tried to keep the giants occupied until Dumbledore could get there. Sam flew up to the castle to get more of the older students to help. Unfortunately, that drew more attention to the castle and the giants who'd been destroying Trelawney's tower started in on the Astronomy tower. They'd already done a lot of damage in a short amount of time when I arrived."

"Hang on — I don't understand how Dumbledore knew something was wrong", he interrupted her. "You said that he was in his office, getting a report from Remus, and then —"

"I don't know", Hermione admitted. "Remus said that he'd just finished talking about the werewolf Portkeys and Dumbledore had sent Fawkes off with an urgent letter to the Ministry. Then Remus was just about to tell him he'd heard a loud noise coming from the forest, when Dumbledore looked at him in a sort of panic and said they should go; he said he heard 'it', too. And the next thing, they were dashing from his office and practically falling over Professor Snape on their way downstairs."

Something struck Harry as odd then. "You left out some people. You said that Neville was all right and that he, George, Percy and Nita were flying around trying to curse the giants and Sam had gone to get more students. And you said something already about Maggie and Angelina. What about — who didn't you mention? There's someone else, I'm sure..."

Silence.

"Well?" he said, wondering why they wouldn't answer him.

Ginny put her arms around his waist and put her head on his chest. "Fred", she said softly, tears in her voice. "Fred is —"

"*Fred!* No!" he cried.

In a strangled voice, Ron said, "George had saved Lavender, see. Plucked her right from one of the giants down by the paddock and was

flying back to the castle with her. She'll be all right eventually, but she'll need a new leg. Partial leg, anyway", he said, and Harry felt his stomach move within him again.

"Why?" Harry choked.

"Bitten off", Hermione explained quietly. "Just above the knee."

Before he could think about this, Ron went on. "Neville said that the giant who'd had Lavender saw Fred and got confused, thought he was George, so he went after *him*. Couldn't reach him, though. Flying too high. So he uprooted a huge old tree and used it like a Beater's bat... only — only Fred was the Bludger..." His voice ended on a choked sob.

Harry held Ginny tightly, feeling her crying into his chest. He could tell how difficult this was for Ron, and he thought of poor Mrs. Weasley...

"They found him near the front gates of the school", Ron whispered. "He'd lost the broom he was riding, see, or he probably could have pointed the handle up and stayed aloft. But he lost his grip when he was hit with the tree and had no way to —"

Ron couldn't go on. Harry felt his own tears beginning to leak out of his otherwise useless eyes. "Who else?" he croaked.

"Well, in all of the chaos", Hermione explained, "Dumbledore decided to stay himself to fight the giants, and so did Remus, who decided not to use the Portkey. He sent Professors Flitwick and McGonagall with me, as well as the elves and some of the Dueling Club, the older students who had already learned to Apparate. Sirius and Sam came too — Sirius was worried about you, Harry, and Sam was worried about Katie. I also brought Ruth, Annika, Zoe, Colin, Tony —"

"Tony didn't make it. He must have died before we managed to link the wands..." Ron added quietly.

"Angelina's still unconscious from the Willow hitting her; she'd been planning to help fight after helping Maggie get the younger kids under the tree", Ginny began, but she couldn't go on.

"What?"

"Any others?"

Ron responded, trying to be dispassionate and straightforward, but a quaver in his voice betrayed his emotions as the list grew. "The third years and up rallied, got out their brooms and also flew down from the castle. George said Will Flitwick flew brilliantly, and he's okay. So's Jamaica, Dean's sister, although she's worried sick about him. Some are just

wounded, others — well —" Harry waited. "Jules Quinn and Gillian Lockley were killed, from Gryffindor, and that girl Jules liked in his year, Amy, I think her name was. Had a twin brother, Andy. I don't know about him. Barry Bagshot's dead too, you know — the one whose aunt or great-aunt wrote all of those books we have to buy every year. I don't know how many from the other houses. No one from Slytherin fought the giants, of course, except for Mariah, in her way."

"How is she?" Draco Malfoy immediately asked.

"She's fine, Malfoy", Hermione said grudgingly. "Unlike *you*, she was actually some *use*..."

"Yeah, except for Mariah, all of the others in your house stayed down in the dungeons. I wouldn't be surprised if the whole lot knew to expect this", he added bitterly. "Let's see, who else... Hermione mentioned that Katie came here with the first wave of Aurors, right? I can't keep track —"

Harry's heart leapt into his throat; he remembered seeing her. "Is she okay?"

Ginny whispered, "It's her foot — it was blown off."

He swallowed, thinking of Katie's perfect little feet... "Colin Creevey probably won't make it. Burns over most of his body. He wouldn't stop screaming, so the doctors — they magically removed his voice box, so he wouldn't disturb the other wounded and dying —" Ron's voice gave out completely now, as though he'd suffered the same procedure, and Harry could hear the tears in it, then heard the rustling of robes, and he suspected that Hermione had enfolded him in her arms.

"So", he said, his voice trembling, "did Dumbledore defeat them or not, then?"

"Well, yes and no. The giants are all dead, if that's what you mean", Hermione confirmed. "And it was partly Professor Dumbledore who did it —"

"Partly? Who else?"

"Well, Remus, Will Flitwick, Neville and the others were doing a fantastic job of defense from the air, but there didn't seem to be any way to stop them coming. They were just too big and a lot of spells were just bouncing off them, like the Death Eaters had put shield charms on them or something. It was actually Mariah who came up with the answer —"

"Mariah!" Draco Malfoy's surprised voice cut in.

"Yeah", Ron spoke again, sounding impressed. "She used those tunnels to get to the lake, and went in. No thanks to your other cronies, Malfoy. Afterward, Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, Nott and Pansy Parkinson were found stunned near the entrance to the tunnels. Looks like Mariah and Millicent took on all of them. Millicent helped her and waited while she went into the lake; Mariah told her that if she didn't come out after an hour to go for help."

"Aha!" Malfoy said triumphantly. "It wasn't just Mariah who fought!"

"Yeah, all right, Millicent had to fight off *other Slytherins* to make sure Mariah could get into the tunnels. *One* other person helped", Ron said grudgingly, as though this didn't count.

"I don't understand", Harry said, his head feeling foggy. "Why did Mariah go into the *lake*?"

"She went to speak to the merpeople!" Hermione exclaimed. "She asked for their help with the giants. And the giant squid, too. The squid was probably the most important of all. Do you realize how strong it is?"

Harry shook his head. "So? I still don't —"

"The squid started pulling the giants into the lake", Ron said excitedly. "None of them had ever learnt to *swim*, since most of the water they've ever been near isn't deep enough for them to need to bother. Voldemort used dragons to get them here to Britain. The squid reached out and wrapped around a giant's legs, pulled him or her into the water and then the merpeople held him there. Giants are strong, but merpeople are *very* strong too, and they were *all* pitching in together, and using these nets they'd woven of really strong water-weed."

"So all twelve giants were drowned?" he gasped, incredulous.

"Eventually. One at a time. Some were a bit difficult at the end, Neville said. Dumbledore was shouting at the merpeople in Mermish — which sounds damn queer, he said — and trying to put banishing charms on the giants to send them into the water, as they were still trying to tear the school down, but the charms weren't working so he just went to the lake himself to try to attract them. He used himself as bait. Neville said he didn't really want to drown them, but when nothing else seemed to be working, he decided it was the only way. So many killed... Even poor old Fang. Hagrid's hut has been completely trampled to bits. It's just — flat. Gone. Not that it really matters now —" Harry thought he heard an `oof' noise from Ron, and Hermione whispering.

"Oh, tactful way to tell him —"

There was a long pause. Harry was afraid to ask. No one said anything. Finally, he heard Ginny say to the others, "I'll do it."

Harry clutched at Ginny again. "It's Hagrid", he whispered. It wasn't a question. And yet a part of his mind did have a question: How could anything kill *Hagrid*?

Hermione answered in a very small voice. "Neville saw it. Professor Dumbledore had gone to confront the giants who were trying to tear down the Astronomy Tower. Three of them saw him and went for him at once, and of course he was able to cast a spell to protect himself, but all Hagrid saw was someone attacking Dumbledore, and he ran in front of the giants..." She took a great gulping breath. "One of them picked him up and threw him far into the forest... Hagrid never really had a chance. He — when he landed — well he didn't really land — Professor Dumbledore found him after it was all over. He was impaled —"

He could tell from her voice that she'd already cried plenty over Hagrid. There had always been a special bond between Hagrid and Hermione. She had taken to the gentle half-giant almost from the start. Harry remembered the hours she put in to try to save Buckbeak, poring over magical law books in the library even while she was missing a tremendous amount of sleep because of the Time Turner. He remembered Hagrid chastising him and Ron for not talking to her after they thought Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers and when she had had McGonagall confiscate his Firebolt to check it for jinxes. And now he had been through the air into the midst of the forest he knew like the back of his hand, which had finally become the death of him.

Harry swallowed, glad he would not be able to see Hagrid in repose, in death. He could not imagine him as anything other than larger than life, hale and hardy. He remembered the tender care he'd received from Hagrid's mother, Fridwulfa, because he was Hagrid's friend. *Hagrid was gone forever*. He was still having trouble getting his mind around that thought...

He didn't want to know any more. Not right now. "What now?" he asked, turning to where he thought Ron and Hermione stood.

"Dumbledore was with some of the dying in the field hospital", Ron said. "Don't know if he's still here or he's gone back to the castle. We

should take you there, see if there's anything that can be done for your eyes..."

"Or for Sandy. *I'm* not wounded, Ron. That's not why I'm blind."

There. He'd said it. *I'm blind*.

Silence met him. He heard them shuffling about awkwardly, then Ron's voice again, as though he'd just thought of something he should have realized before.

"Hey! I almost forgot! *Stupefy!*" Harry never realized before that there was a crackling, static sound to the air when this spell — maybe all spells — was being performed. He heard the spell make contact with a body, heard the body hit the ground.

"What did you do, Ron? Who did you stun?"

"*Harry*", he said, as though it should have been painfully obvious and Harry shouldn't have needed to ask. "Malfoy, of course. He's my prisoner."

"Prisoner!"

"Of course! He's a traitor. He's the one who transported us here with that Portkey. This is all his fault, isn't it? He should be in whatever they're going to use in place of Azkaban for a good long while..."

"Ron! I didn't bring him back to go to prison! He may be a traitor — but he's also a hero. Because of him, Voldemort was defeated. He could have let Ginny be killed. I could be dead. And if I hadn't given you and Ginny the wands for the spell, which I couldn't have done while Voldemort was still alive, you could be dead too. You owe your life to him. Revive him."

"*Revive him?* But —"

"*That's an order*, Major Weasley."

He heard Ron gasp. "Are you — are you *pulling rank* on me, Harry?"

Harry took a deep breath, considering. "That's General Potter. And yes. Yes, I am. Now revive him."

He heard Ron move toward Malfoy, then say, "*Ennervate*." That was followed by achy moaning and then belligerence as the Slytherin came back into consciousness.

"Sod off, Weasley! What are you about, you bloody bugger? What did I land on, nettles? I just came back from the dead. What's next for you? Planning to kick little old ladies now? Use any babies for Quaffles lately?"

"Shut it, Malfoy. Quit whinging or I'll stun you again, after putting a few other hexes on you. You're the last person I ever wanted to see alive

again. I said it before and I'll say it again: this is all *your fault!*"

"Ripping to see you too, wanker."

"Insufferable git."

"Stupid prat."

"Useless pillock."

"Hang on!" Hermione yelled, trying to put an end to the exchange of insults. "Stop it, the pair of you. Whether you like it or not, Ron, Harry has a point. If it weren't for Malfoy —"

"Well, if you feel that way Granger, you can just come here and give the conquering hero a little well-deserved good-to-see-you-alive-snogging", he responded, voice dripping smugness. "After all, I *did* try to protect you, too. Even Potter thanked me for it."

Harry heard Hermione make a retching noise. "Not bloody likely", she told him coldly. "You do like to push, don't you? I was just —"

"You know, seven years of school, and I think that's the first time I've ever heard you say *bloody*. Save the apology, Granger. I don't need your pity. I knew what you were doing. I was just messing about. Gads! You are just too easy sometimes, you know? But then, both Potter *and* Weasley are well aware of just how easy you are —"

Harry heard a scuffle and turned to Ginny, puzzled, who acted as his eyes for him. "Hermione's trying to restrain Ron", she said in a bored voice. "Ron's trying to get to Malfoy to hit him. Some things never change, do they?"

"Right. Can you guide me to him?" he asked her softly. "Malfoy, I mean."

He didn't hear a response, so he said, "Gin? Did you hear me?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Harry! Yes. I nodded, not remembering that of course you can't see me. So stupid —"

"It's okay. You'll get used to it. Just don't do silly things like trying not to say the words *see* and *look*, and things like that. Don't walk on eggshells around me. I'm blind. Not talking about it isn't going to change that fact. Now take me to Malfoy."

She guided him a short way across a gravelly terrain, and when the hand he had outstretched touched a body, he pulled it back abruptly.

"Sorry, Malfoy."

"S'okay, Potter", he grumbled, as though he wished he could complain about the person who had brought him back from the dead, but didn't think

that would be good form.

"No, Malfoy, I'm saying sorry in advance for this", he said, pulling back his hand and suddenly walloping him across the jaw. He thought for a crazy moment that Malfoy might duck or do something else to avoid his fist, but he must have been too surprised or just disbelieving. The satisfyingly painful contact of his knuckles with Malfoy's jawbone told him he'd calculated correctly. He heard the agonized yell as Malfoy fell away from him, the sound of him hitting the ground, the scream as he landed again on the nettles.

"*Bloody hell!*" he bellowed from the ground. Harry shook his sore hand, an ache radiating up his arm to his shoulder, which had taken the brunt of the blow. He put his bleeding knuckles in his mouth; that had been very enjoyable, he decided. A very concrete feeling of accomplishment. He tasted his own blood and tried to slow his breathing down again. His heart was racing from the rush of hitting Malfoy.

"Ron wanted you to pay for what you'd done. Now you've paid. I just wish I could see the look on your face —"

"You are *not* going to get away with that, Potter —" Malfoy growled at him. Harry heard him struggling to stand; he stood his ground, trying to push Ginny behind him, but she moved forward and positioned herself between the two of them.

"Stop it! Stop it, the pair of you!"

Malfoy started to say, "Get out of the way, Ginny, so I can —"

"Will you look at yourself?" she practically shrieked at Malfoy. "You're trying to hit someone who's not only blind, but who is blind because he *saved your life*. And yes, I'm aware of the irony of yelling at you, since *you* saved *my* life, but that still doesn't mean —"

"What *does* it mean, Ginny? Hmm? Does it mean you're going to throw yourself at me, to show your gratitude? Didn't think so. You never did when you were my girlfriend, why should you start now? And saving your life! After all *that*, it's you and Potter, off into the sunset. Only think of this; if I were still dead, how awkward would that be for the two of you? Hmm? You knowing that I'd die in your place, and *him* not being able to rid you of my memory. I'd always be between you. But because Potty finds a way to one-up me and bring me back to life, *he's* the sodding hero and I'm the traitor. That's just bloody brilliant. Well, I have to say, Potter, my

hat's off to you. You found a way to continue to be in her bed and not have her wishing it was me..."

Harry felt a rage bubble up from inside him and he lunged forward, thwarted by Ginny, who was grunting with the effort of holding him back. "Let me go, Ginny. I've already landed one punch. He's shown he doesn't even have the brains to duck, can't even avoid a blow from a *blind man*! What kind of idiot gets hit by a blind man, Malfoy?"

"I hope you're happy, Harry", Ron's bitter voice came suddenly from behind him. "Bet you're not so glad now you saved his worthless life. If it weren't for him —" Ron started to say again.

Harry turned in the direction of Ron's voice. "Yeah, well, what kind of person would I be if I could only do that for someone I don't *detest*?"

"I guess, Harry. I guess", Ron said grudgingly.

Harry reached around Ginny and extended his hand to Malfoy. "We're done, Malfoy. No one owes anyone anything. All accounts are null and void."

He waited; after some hesitation, he felt Malfoy's hand grasp his. His hand was still a little cold, as though his circulation wasn't yet quite up to speed. "Agreed", he said tersely, then let Harry's hand go as soon as he could.

The five of them walked across the field, Ginny leading Harry toward the makeshift hospital, where wounded were being attended to, regardless of what side they'd been on.

"But", Hermione explained, "the Death Eaters are segregated and under heavy guard. And all wands are locked up — no matter what side you were on in the battle. No one wants a Death Eater to be able to nick someone's wand from their pocket while they're walking around the beds. So everyone has to check theirs before going in."

Harry took out his wand and ran his fingers over the smooth wood before handing it over to the wizard who was keeper of the wands; the last spell he'd performed had been the *Enuma Elish*. And it had worked; Malfoy was alive. Alive and as obnoxious as ever. Harry had to smile inside. *Maybe he'll finally turn over a new leaf for real, when people start thanking him left and right for contributing to Voldemort's final defeat.* He thought of his best friend in his other life, the boy who had loved his sister and sacrificed himself so he wouldn't have to remember loving and losing her. Harry realized that he should have known how passionately Draco

Malfoy loved; he'd been willing to die for love in that other life, and he'd been willing to die for it in this one. And both times, what he had done had had a cataclysmic effect...

Professor Dumbledore had returned to the castle, so he wasn't on hand to greet Harry, but Madam Pomfrey was there and insisted upon taking care of Harry and Draco herself. She clucked over the split skin on Harry's knuckles, from hitting Malfoy, and she said there was a bruise beginning to blossom on Draco's jaw. She either decided not to comment on Draco having died and come back to life, or she didn't know. No one felt like volunteering this information. Ginny and Ron and Hermione were shooed away. Ginny kissed Harry softly on the lips before going, gently taking Sandy from him (she assured him it was just temporary), and Hermione gave him a friendly kiss on the cheek. When Madam Pomfrey was done with them, Harry turned tentatively to the other boy, speaking quietly.

"Malfoy?" A noncommittal grunt. "Is anybody else nearby? Anyone who could hear us talking if we kept it quiet?"

"Who said I wanted to talk to you, Potter?"

"Well, I was just wondering... What did you see when you were dead? Where were you?"

"You saw where I was."

"I did?"

"Yeah. You were looking right at me. Looking pretty happy about what you were seeing, I might add."

"And what was I seeing?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because I think we were seeing very different things. When I woke up after jumping into the abyss with you, it looked like I was at Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts?"

"Yes. I had to go through seven gates, until I entered the Slytherin common room. Except that it wasn't. It looked like an ancient temple. And your dead body was hanging on a hook, like a piece of meat."

"On a *what*?"

"A hook."

"I heard what you said. What I mean is — well, that's not where I was."

"I told you. So where *were* you?"

Harry could actually hear Draco gulp. "Not a good place. Not a comfortable place. I've experienced the Cruciatus Curse before, mind you,

but I've never felt anything like — well, that's why you looked so smug, I thought."

"You were being tortured? I couldn't see that."

"Well, yeah. Ruddy well surprised me, frankly. So to speak. I mean, I never really believed in a `hell' until I'd died and gone there..."

"That's not true."

"What's not true?"

"That you didn't believe in a hell, or some kind of punishment. If you didn't, you wouldn't have been where you were."

"What?"

"That's what I was told. When I was in the Slytherin common room that wasn't. And Dumbledore told me the same thing, once. Basically. After death, people see what they expect to see. You obviously expected to see yourself in a place where you would receive punishment for the awful things you'd done, and that's where you were. After we die, we can't deceive ourselves. You may have convinced yourself that what you'd done wasn't dreadful when you were alive, but after death, that kind of self-deception is impossible. And if you expected people who'd done what you did in life to be punished for it after death — well, then, it's no wonder that's what happened to you."

Malfoy was quiet. Harry heard distant moans and groans on the other side of the tent, and witches and wizards bustling about tending to the wounded. He'd let the words just tumble out of him, in spite of the fact that he'd been rather close-mouthed before. Now that he couldn't see anything, silence felt like the world slipping away from him; he had nothing to anchor him if there was no sound.

"Malfoy? Don't you have anything to say?"

Silence again. Harry steeled himself to be patient and wait for the response. Finally, Malfoy said softly, "Yeah. I do. Thanks for bringing me back, Potter. And that's the last time I'm going to say it."

Harry let him wait a little now, too. "You're welcome", he said simply, after a minute.

There was some more silence, and then Malfoy spoke again. "Harry."

"What?" He tried not to show surprise at being called by his first name.

"What do *you* believe in?"

Harry thought for a moment. He thought about the times he'd changed what shouldn't be changed. One of those changes had stood — the rescue

of Sirius and Buckbeak. One had not — his saving his mother and sister. Now he'd changed something else, and he'd paid a high price for it. And despite everything, he knew that he'd do it again. He also strongly suspected that it was possible that the next time Draco Malfoy died, he wouldn't be where he was before.

Now that Ron wasn't here to goad him, even though he wasn't exactly hugging Harry and declaring him to be his closest friend in the world, and he wasn't voicing an ambition to work for world peace and to feed all the starving people and house all the homeless wretches in the world, it *did* seem that there was *perhaps* a slow change taking place in Draco Malfoy. Harry could hear something in his voice; he wasn't *exactly* the same person who had perished by throwing himself between Ginny and Voldemort. Draco Malfoy been reborn in more ways than one.

"What do I believe in, Malfoy?" He paused again. Then the answer suddenly leapt into his brain. He smiled, not sure whether the other boy was looking at him. It didn't matter.

"I believe in second chances."

* * *

When they had all returned to Hogwarts, Harry managed to convince Madam Pomfrey that he was in perfectly good health and did not need to stay in the hospital wing that night. Ginny had returned Sandy him, and he reluctantly gave her up to Snape, who took her down to his dungeon to see whether he had an appropriate potion to help perk her up. Harry fell into bed in the tower room feeling strangely empty and not a bit like sleeping, but also like there was nowhere else he would rather be. He was glad that, before turning in, he couldn't see Seamus' empty bed, nor Dean's. Ron had gone to the seventh year girls' dormitory to spend the night with Hermione; they both felt deep remorse over Parvati and neither wanted to be alone. Harry didn't imagine that they'd be doing more than holding each other tightly and breaking into sporadic tears.

He and Neville were the only ones in the seventh year boys' dormitory, and Harry could hear that Neville was also lying in his bed sobbing over Parvati — and probably others, too. Harry's eyes were dry, though. He felt numb all over.

Soon after he had put his head onto the pillow, Harry heard the door open. "Ron?" he whispered, thinking perhaps that his best friend had

decided to spend the night in his own bed after all. He turned out to be partially right.

"Me too, Harry", Hermione whispered. "It was just too — quiet in my dormitory. We — we wanted to be with *people*."

He shifted over on the bed and patted the mattress. "Want to talk?" he croaked, not sure that he was feeling up to talking, but he wouldn't mind listening. When he listened to Ron and Hermione he could vividly imagine their faces, the way their expressions changed, the light in their eyes. It was almost as good as still being able to see them. Perhaps this was what he really wanted, what he needed.

He felt the mattress shift as they accepted his invitation, then felt Hermione's arms go around him, her hair tickling his nose. He felt Ron's arms go around them both as Hermione's body began to shake with her tears. They enfolded each other in warmth and life. Harry felt two smaller weights on the mattress and then heard the low motor-like purring.

"Crookshanks?" he asked Hermione.

"Yes. And Ron's Argent, too."

She put her head on Harry's shoulder again and he held her with one arm and petted Crookshanks with the other, the rhythm of the cat's purring matched by the gentle circles he traced on her back. He could feel Ron's warm weight against his leg, his arm moving as he stroked his own cat.

"Neville?" Hermione whispered suddenly, her voice thick with tears.

"Okay", Neville said in a muffled, nasal sort of voice, climbing onto the bed with them. Harry assumed that he'd been standing nearby, a wordless plea on his face; Hermione must have seen his need and motioned for him to join them.

As the four of them sat together, mourning their fellow Gryffindors (as well as students from other houses), Harry had a strange thought: *We're all together again*. He had a very vivid memory, for a moment, of the four of them sitting in the gently rocking boat as they crossed the great cold lake to Hogwarts castle soon after their arrival in Hogsmeade. He wondered whether the others also thought of this, but he didn't ask.

At length, the crying gave way to the talking. About Parvati, about Seamus, about Tony and Colin, repeated stories about Hagrid. Laughter began to be as frequent as tears and Harry knew that there was no other way he would have wanted to spend that night, remembering the good things, picturing the faces of the departed, Ron even dredging up stories

about when they didn't know Peter Pettigrew was Scabbers the rat, recalling the time he'd bitten Goyle on the finger.

Harry thought it might be near dawn when the others finally fell asleep. Neville lay across the foot of Harry's bed, snoring softly; Ron and Hermione had moved to Ron's bed, taking the cats with them. They were also snuffling quietly while they slept. Harry sat on his pillow, his legs drawn up to his chest, listening to the birds beginning to awaken outside the window. He hadn't slept at all but didn't really feel tired. He heard a footstep on the landing and wasn't surprised when the door started opening slowly. A familiar voice whispered his name.

"Harry?"

"Ginny?"

He heard her soft steps pad across the stone floor and then felt the mattress dip; a moment later she was in his arms and he was gripping her tightly, his cheek on her hair. "I'm sorry I didn't come up last night, Harry", she apologized. "But Ruth — she's devastated. I felt that she —"

"Sssh. Don't worry about it. She needed you."

He felt her head bob. "We stayed up talking most of the night. She's asleep now, finally. Poor thing! She and Tony were going to Venice this summer to visit family, but now —"

"Which family?"

"Both. It turns out that his family is from Venice and hers as well. On her dad's side. Granted, her family lives in the *ghetto vecchio* — that's the Old Ghetto — and his has a palazzo on the Grand Canal —"

"Sounds like you talked about a lot."

"We did. What was going on here?" He realized that it probably looked peculiar, Ron and Hermione in bed together in the same room with Harry and Neville, and Neville across the foot of Harry's bed.

"We spent most of the night talking too, the four of us. Did you know that we all rode in the same boat to cross the lake when we were first years?"

"No, I didn't know that", she whispered.

"And the four of us found Fluffy together, too."

"Fluffy?"

He frowned. "I'm fairly certain I told you about Fluffy. That three-headed dog of Hagrid's."

"Oh, right!" she said. "I just thought of `Fluffy's lair' as the place where, um, you and Hermione —"

"Oh, right. No, I thought you knew about all this? See, Malfoy had challenged me to a duel —"

As he told her the story, it felt to him like he was telling her a fairy tale, something from another lifetime, a long-lost era. *Was that really nearly seven years ago?* he thought. He remembered running into Hermione in the common room and finding Neville curled up on the floor of the corridor, fast asleep... he remembered the panic at nearly being caught by Filch, how stupid he'd felt when Hermione pointed out that Malfoy had set him up, then the sheer terror of being discovered by Peeves followed by the enormous relief he'd felt when Hermione had grabbed his wand and pronounced the *Alohomora* incantation so that the four of them could hide — only to be introduced to Fluffy.

Ginny kissed him on the cheek. "Ron wrote home to us regularly that year, but that doesn't sound like the sort of thing he would want Mum to know about", she said, snuggling down into his arms and giggling softly. Harry grinned.

"I reckon not. And he couldn't have told you himself at the Christmas hols because he stayed here that year."

She nodded against his chin, whispering, "Yes, I was so lonely that Christmas. I mean, it was wonderful to go with Mum and Dad to visit Charlie in Romania, but I missed Ron and the others. We were with all of these *strangers* for the holiday, and in a different country. It felt very odd."

"I'd forgotten all about that", Harry said. "That's right, I remember Ron saying that your parents had gone to visit Charlie. I forgot that would mean you'd gone, too, especially as he didn't mention you."

She shuddered. "I was scared to death of the dragons. God! I was having flashbacks when we were at Stonehenge. Charlie didn't make it any better, he was so foolhardy around them. `Daring', he called it. I thought I was going to throw up every time I saw him come close to danger. I used to have nightmares about Charlie being killed by one of them, after visiting him and seeing for myself how dreadful they were, and that's all I could think about when you were trying to get that egg away from the Hungarian Horntail..." She paused. "Later I had nightmares about Draco turning into one of those dragons, and chasing you on your broomstick. It

would start off with him talking to me, perfectly civilized, then suddenly —"

"I had a hallucination like that!" Harry declared. "When I'd been burnt, at Roger and Alicia's wedding —"

"Well, you had an excuse, didn't you? Your mind does funny things when it's experiencing that much pain, to get away from it —"

He nodded. "Yeah, I reckon it was another way of coping, like when I'm blocking Cruciatus."

Somehow he felt like all barriers had been lowered as they talked, like they were more exposed to each other than they ever had been. And yet — there was still something he couldn't tell her. Something he hadn't told anyone. But there was no reason to tell. What good would it do? He had to stop dwelling on it and move on. Draco Malfoy was alive and he, Harry Potter, was blind. That's all there was to it.

They sat quietly for a time; eventually, Harry heard the others starting to stir. For once Ron didn't get excited about Ginny being in Harry's bed. He just greeted her casually, "Oh, morning, Gin."

"Morning, Ron, Hermione, Neville."

After the girls left, the boys dressed for breakfast. Harry was ready first; if there was one thing he didn't need his sight for, it was dressing, having been dressing himself in the dark under the stairs for ten years before Hogwarts. He left the dormitory before Ron and Neville, feeling like he was moving in a fog as he brushed his hands over the stone walls in the curved stairwell. When he arrived in the common room, Ginny immediately took his arm and he felt a bit better. The other Gryffindors were subdued as they all greeted their Head Boy and shook his hand (the boys) or shyly hugged him (the girls). It didn't seem to Harry like there were nearly enough people for it to be all of Gryffindor House, and he was glad again that he couldn't see them. He saw the missing faces in his mind's eye. That was bad enough.

When he arrived in the Great Hall, holding Ginny's hand, he heard a murmur roll through the crowd. He swallowed and tried to put out of his mind, even though he could hear far more of their whispering than they probably supposed:

"He took away You-Know-Who's power, yeah? He turned him into a Muggle, and then —"

"Draco Malfoy's actually a hero!"

"No, he was still a wizard. He put the Killing Curse on him."

"Imagine that — a Slytherin hero!"

"Well, so is Mariah Kirkner a Slytherin hero."

"He put the Killing Curse on who?"

"I heard he forced You-Know-Who to eat poisoned sweets —"

"How could he have put the Killing Curse on him if he's still alive?"

"Yeah, I heard she talked the merpeople into helping with the giants."

"So, she's part mermaid, then?"

"It's 'on whom'. On Draco Malfoy."

"She's The Girl Who Lived! Did you see her scar?"

"Nah, I heard she was part grindylow on her mum's side or something."

"I still don't understand. If You-Know-Who hit him with the Killing Curse, why's he alive?"

"That's why Harry Potter's blind. He made a deal with the devil, to give Malfoy's life back —"

"He really did? A deal with the devil? What'd he do that for?"

"Yeah, if he was going to save anyone, why not my brother, or someone else killed by the giants? My brother never tried to get anyone killed."

"I don't get it either. Draco Malfoy?"

He heard it over and over: *Why? Why save Draco Malfoy?* He felt like screaming his reasons at the top of his lungs, yet he remained quiet, eating his toast, pretending he couldn't hear any of it when it felt like it was filling his head.

It promised to be a strange week. All lessons were canceled, as were the rest of the end of term exams. With Hagrid and Trelawney dead, plus Vector, Flitwick and McGonagall in the hospital wing, there weren't even enough teachers to handle all of the lessons if they were to be held. All seventh year students who had been interrupted in taking their NEWTs, written and practical, were passed.

A memorial was to be held a week after the battle; Professor Dumbledore had taken on the task of planning it himself and had asked Hermione and Snape for assistance with the music. This had surprised Harry at first, but then he remembered the booming sound of his stepfather's deep voice as he sang sea-chanties on the *Patricia*, or Christmas carols at Hog's End, harmonizing with his wife's lilting voice while they decorated the house for the holiday.

Hermione was going to go see Dumbledore about this planning after breakfast; Ron was going to meet with Remus in the Gryffindor common room to discuss his impending job at the Ministry. Before she could leave the Gryffindor table, Harry turned to his right, where he knew Hermione was sitting.

"You should get Ruth to sing", he whispered to her.

"I'm way ahead of you Harry. Already done. She's going to do Ravel's *Kaddish*", she whispered back.

This did not surprise Harry. "I can do something, if you like..." He told Hermione his idea and she hugged him and nodded against his chin, which he took to mean that she approved.

She told him that she'd also already asked Will Flitwick, which pleased Harry; he remembered Will's flute-like voice raised in song before they flew into the forest to save Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy. Before Ron became a werewolf...

Was that why Ron wished Harry had left Draco dead? he wondered. Did Ron blame Draco Malfoy for his lycanthropy? Perhaps he felt that enough sacrifices had been made on Draco Malfoy's behalf. Harry had a feeling that Ron would never fully understand what he had done. Nor would anyone else, very likely.

After breakfast, Harry and Ginny went to the staff wing to visit Sirius. Harry had been relieved to find that Sirius had been injured during the battle at Godric's Hollow but was going to recover with only minor scarring and bruising. Madam Pomfrey had allowed him to return to his rooms, as the infirmary was overflowing with people who still needed to be transferred to St. Mungo's. After greeting Mrs. Figg, who was babysitting little Arne in the sitting room, they entered the bedroom; Ginny informed Harry in a whisper that Alicia was holding Sirius' hand as he laid in bed and she was pressing a cold cloth to his brow.

"Erm", Ginny had begun, upon approaching them; "is there something you'd both like to tell us?"

Harry had suspected it for a while, despite Sirius' protests to the contrary, but now they both finally admitted to having been involved for some months. (Harry thought that his accusing Sirius of being attracted to her might be the main reason he hadn't owned up to it.) In the aftermath of the Rodney Jeffries debacle it had been necessary to cover up Alicia's part in it, as well-intentioned as she had been. It was true that she had worked

to get her father elected to Parliament at the behest of a Death Eater, but she hadn't realized it was to replace him with Narcissa Malfoy masquerading as a Muggle, nor that anyone would be murdered to bring this about. Harry learned that there were a few other things going on of which he'd had no knowledge, such as Alicia's father being broken out of Muggle prison by Sirius. (Her parents had been staying in the staff wing with her, well out of sight of the students and even the other staff.) That, Harry thought, explained some of his dodginess and long absences. If there was anyone who understood the anguish of being an innocent man in prison, it was Sirius Black. He did not want Alicia's father to suffer — even without dementors — a moment more than necessary.

"We're emigrating", Alicia finally told them, her voice shaking; Harry could hear how frightened she was. *Emigrating!* It had never occurred to him, but the moment she said it, he thought, *Yes. Starting over. That sounds about right...*

"Where? When?" he asked, letting himself be led to a chair by Ginny.

"End of the month. To America", Sirius said with a croak in his voice. "We're taking Arne. There's a small fishing village populated entirely by wizards on an island off the coast of Maine. That's in the northeast. It's practically in Canada it's so far north. At one point, I think the Canadian Ministry of Magic was fighting with the Americans over who could claim the island, but as it's mostly barren rock, a few wizarding families and a handful of seals, I think they decided the Americans could have it and good riddance. Calling what's there a village is really a bit of a stretch."

"Huh!" Harry said. "And what will they think of the infamous Sirius Black coming to live there? Your fame must have spread to North America by now."

Sirius laughed. "I imagine you're right, but no one there will know it's me, if everything goes as planned. All of us are getting new identities. Dumbledore is seeing to it. We're *really* getting a fresh start."

"All of you?" Harry asked, frowning.

"Well, I am because the American Bureau of Magic could choose to extradite me if the British Ministry ever realizes just what I did", Alicia said quietly, sounding more than a little ashamed of her actions. "My dad is because if the Muggle authorities ever got wind of an escaped convicted murderer being in the country, they'd probably extradite *him* back here, and my mum is because she's married to my dad..."

"Hmm", Ginny agreed. "I see the problem. It's so far away, though! Are you going to cut yourself off from *everyone* you used to know?"

"Not entirely", Sirius admitted. "But you'll have to send us trans-Atlantic owl post under our new names. It'll take a bit of getting used to."

"And we don't want to have any fuss about the magical or Muggle authorities checking our identities for a marriage license, so we're going to marry here first and then present it as a *fait accompli* once we're in America", added Alicia softly.

Harry's jaw dropped. "Marry! You didn't tell me that — congratulations!" he cried, trying to find his way to Sirius to pump his hand and give him a hug. Ginny helped guide him, and he thumped Sirius on the back just a little too hard, making him wince. "Oops. Sorry! I just — well, bloody hell! I thought the pair of you fancied each other, but I didn't think you were up for getting *married*..."

"You just thought we were going to shack up?" Alicia said slyly. Harry felt his face grow warm and was glad that he didn't have to meet her eye.

"Well, to be honest, yeah. I thought — well, I thought —"

"— that we were already shagging day and night?" Sirius suggested, laughter in his voice. Harry's face felt warmer still.

"Well, I wasn't going to say it, but —"

Sirius and Alicia laughed. "It wasn't quite like that", Sirius informed him. "I'm not a young lad anymore, after all —"

"You're young enough for me", Alicia said in a soft but firm voice.

"Oh! You're so *adorable* together..." Ginny told them.

"Ginny!" Sirius laughed. "I don't think I've *ever* been called 'adorable'."

"Professor Dumbledore himself is going to perform the ceremony before we leave", Alicia told them. "It'll be a double ceremony, actually. It just seems to be the season for weddings..."

"Double?" Harry said, frowning, trying to think of who else might be about to marry. Then his jaw dropped. "Oh. My. God. Did Ron pop the question to Hermione? How could he not have told me himself as soon as it happened?"

"No, silly", Ginny said, a scowl in her voice. "I think I know who. Think about it. Who else do you know who are *already* engaged?"

Harry wracked his brain, then widened his useless eyes, turning in Sirius' direction. "No! You've got to be joking! *He* agreed to share his

wedding day with *you*? Of *all people*?"

Sirius laughed again. "I couldn't make this up if I tried. Yes, Harry. Dumbledore will be performing the wedding ceremony for both me and Alicia and for Maggie and Severus. That's the double wedding. It would make history were it not for the fact that it'll need to be very hush-hush."

Harry was still in shock. "I can't believe it. After you tried to get him killed —"

"— and he tried to get me kissed by a dementor. Yes, clocks will probably strike seventeen and it will snow in Tahiti." He laughed some more. "But here's another thing, Harry — it works out well because we both want to have the same best man. You'll do it for us both, I hope?"

Harry was grinning ear to ear now and lunged forward to hug his godfather again. "Of course I will, you prat! You even have to ask?" In the back of his mind, though, Harry wondered whether Severus Snape would be annoyed by not getting to ask him himself. Sirius had beaten him to it.

"Well, at a certain point — yes. I do have to ask. So, that's a yes?" He could hear that Sirius was trying to suppress his laughter now, unsuccessfully.

"What do you think? Of course it's a yes!" he declared, pulling Ginny onto his lap. He laughed and put her arms around his neck.

"There will be one maid of honor, too", said Alicia. "I'm having Angelina and so is Maggie. She's her sister-in-law, after all. Sort of. Angelina and George will actually finally be having a wedding later in the summer. That one will be big — your mum is *insisting* —" she told Ginny; "— and not a bit hushed up, but we won't be here for it, unfortunately", she added wistfully.

"So many weddings!" Ginny said, a strange note in her voice. Harry suddenly felt extremely uncomfortable and wanted very much to change the subject.

Despite having felt previously that nothing could make him happier than asking Ginny to be with him for the rest of his life, he was uncertain now. How could he ask her to tether herself to him, sightless as he was? And yet — it was right for him to be like this.

They left the staff wing just in time for lunch, and she brought up another subject he'd been dreading: how to fix his eyes.

"Perhaps Nita —"

"No, Ginny", he said firmly as they walked down the marble stairs.

"Well, at least magical eyes —"

"No."

"Why not?"

He swallowed, stopping, gripping the handrail on the stairs very tightly. "It wouldn't be right."

"But Harry —"

"I'm not discussing it", he said brusquely, worried that this would be more likely to come between them than if there was no way to give him his sight again. He finally gave in to at least having an examination by one of the St. Mungo's eye doctors. But he made no promises to accept magical eyes or any other way of getting around his sacrifice.

The next morning, Dr. Chaudhri came to see him, along with Nita. Professor McGonagall, well enough to leave the hospital wing, had given them her office for the purpose, patting his shoulder firmly before she left. She was sniffing a little, he thought.

Nita, on the other hand, was her usual no-nonsense self.

"Sit *still*, Harry", she ordered him, an irritated edge to her voice. She was reminding him more than a little of his mother and he bit back a borderline rude response.

"I am sitting as still as I can possibly be expected to, especially considering what she's *doing* to me", he said through gritted teeth, gripping the arms of the chair as Dr. Chaudhri closed his right eye with her thumb on the eyelid and then pressed her wand to the sensitive skin there, muttering an incantation which was repeated on the left eye. It felt like she was trying to poke her wand *through* his eyelids, as far as he was concerned.

When she had done some other highly undignified things to him concerning his ears, he was told that the examination was over. He heard Dr. Chaudhri walk a few feet away to consult with Nita.

"*It's as I thought, Nita —*"

"*Are you sure? I don't know, Jess. Why would —*"

"I can hear you!" Harry cried, feeling very irked. "Remember — blind man here. Sensitive hearing and all that." He didn't think, though, that someone who was sighted would have had any trouble hearing them either. Somehow, through being blind, it was as though *he'd* become invisible to *them*.

"Harry", Ginny started to scold him. He heard Nita and Dr. Chaudhri approach him again.

Suddenly he heard Dr. Chaudhri's voice say, "Here, Harry."

He started to frown, then felt a soft feathery thing hit his forehead. He heard a mechanical whirring that sounded familiar and he floundered about with his hands, scrambling to touch his face, his chest, trying to work out what had collided with him. He failed to catch it, much as he flailed with his arms in the air around where he was sitting.

"What's the big idea? What was that?"

"See, Jess?" Nita's annoyed voice was heard.

Dr. Chaudhri spoke again. "I'm still not convinced. You told me yourself that his powers of self-suggestion are considerable."

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here! I'm blind, not comatose. Would someone bloody well tell me what is going on and what that thing was that practically flew through my head?" he demanded. "Was it a Snitch?"

"Spot on", Dr. Chaudhri said smugly. "I told you, Nita", she added.

"Told her what?" he wanted to know.

"That you can see."

Harry had never felt such fury surge up in him. Not the Dursleys — even Aunt Marge — not being convicted of his mother's murder, nothing compared to how furious he felt upon hearing Dr. Chaudhri say this. "I can *what*?"

"You can see. You did an admirable job of pretending *not* to see the Snitch flying straight at you, but how did you know it was a Snitch if you couldn't see it?" He was sure she thought this sounded reasonable, but he wanted to throttle the woman.

"I can tell it's a Snitch, you *quack*, because it felt feathery when it collided with my forehead and I can hear the wings making noise", he ground out, trying to resist the urge to take out his wand and randomly start throwing curses around; he might hit Ginny, after all, or Nita, who did not seem to agree with Dr. Chaudhri. "And I think the fact that I can't *see* pretty much cancels out your saying that I can. I think I'd *know* if I could see, thank you very much."

"Not necessarily. Many people with hysterical blindness have truly convinced themselves that they cannot see a thing. They've even managed

to control their bodies to the extent that their pupils do not dilate when bright light is brought near. I've read about cases where —"

"*Hysterical blindness!*" Harry, Ginny and Nita all said together.

"That's it", Nita said firmly. "Goodbye, Jess. I did not bring you here to —"

"Hear me out!" Dr. Chaudhri insisted.

Harry stood, shaking. "You heard Nita. *Get out*. I can no more see than a Muggle can do magic."

"There is *nothing physically wrong with you!*" Dr. Chaudhri exclaimed, sounding as frustrated as Harry felt. He hesitated momentarily.

"There isn't?" he asked.

"No. Your optic nerve, your eyes, everything is in perfect working order. There is absolutely no reason why you shouldn't be able to see. Except for the fact that you evidently can't."

He swallowed, sitting. When he'd told Ginny that it 'wouldn't be right' when she'd brought up magical eyes, it hadn't occurred to him that he couldn't change his mind. Ever.

"So —" he started to say.

"— magical eyes are out of the question. They interact with the optic nerve to send your mind visual information. But your real eyes seem to be working just fine and aren't. That means that we couldn't guarantee that the magical ones would work either. And I would never recommend removing healthy organs to experiment with prosthetics if there's a very good chance that the prosthetics would fail", Dr. Chaudhri told them. "Which, I think, in this case there is."

"Since I'm pretending to be blind", he growled at her.

"No, since you're *convinced* that you're blind. It's a different issue. It's not something you're doing consciously..."

"And Cedric Diggory was in the pink of health. There was absolutely no reason for him not to be up and running about, except for the little matter of having been hit with the Killing Curse. Listen, has it ever occurred to you that I might be blind because the goddess *blinded* me? That that's why my eyes seem like they should still work?"

"The — the *what?*" Dr. Chaudhri sputtered.

"A goddess blinded Harry", Ginny confirmed.

"Oh", Dr. Chaudhri said now, sounded deflated. "You didn't tell me it was god-magic. That's another story entirely. Accidents we can fix with

magical eyes. Hysterical blindness as a result of a traumatic experience we can treat as well. But god-magic... There are some things humans just shouldn't mess about with..."

Her voice was very soft now and Harry was a little sorry that he'd yelled at her. Harry turned to Ginny was. "Please, can we go now? There's nothing to be done. And even if there was — I wouldn't want anything done."

"All right", she agreed, sounding like she was trying not to cry.

When they were in the corridor she collapsed against him, her face buried in his shirt. He stroked her hair, feeling numb. *There is nothing physically wrong with you.* No, not a thing. I just can't see.

"Sssh, Ginny", he said, feeling her shivering as though she was freezing. "I'm fine with it, really I am. Aren't — aren't you?" But even as he said this, he was starting to have doubts.

She sniffed loudly but did not answer him. He stepped back a little. "You — you don't understand, Harry —"

She pulled away from him and he heard her footsteps receding along the corridor.

"Bloody hell", he said softly, realizing that he was going to have to get back to Gryffindor Tower on his own. *She doesn't want to be with me anymore,* he thought, his heart lurching wildly. *What have I done?*

He sank down, crouching against the wall, running his hand through his hair. He hadn't bothered trying to do anything with it since he'd returned, and he hadn't bothered shaving either; he could feel the stubble on his cheeks. He'd been afraid of taking off the end of his nose or his ear if he used magic to shave (or if he used a razor, for that matter). *Perhaps I'll just grow a beard,* he thought. *Then I'll look less like myself, harder to spot in a crowd...*

He heard the door to McGonagall's office open and two sets of footsteps that stopped short. "Are you all right, Harry?" Nita's voice asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. But Ginny's a bit upset and now I can't find my way back to the common room. I mean, it's hard enough to deal with the corridors and stairs moving about when you can see them, if you know what I mean."

"Well, Professor McGonagall should be back any minute and she can help you. I'm afraid I'd only get you more lost, as I've never been to your common room."

"You should have done", Harry said immediately. "You shouldn't have gone to Durmstrang. You should have gone to Hogwarts."

"Well — can you excuse me for a minute, Harry?" She took a deep breath before saying to Dr. Chaudhri, "I'm sorry about all this, Jess. Listen, you're familiar with the castle, right? Can you see your own way out?"

"I'm fine", Dr. Chaudhri answered. "Take care of yourself, Harry", she said quietly to him.

He didn't answer her but waited for her footsteps to also recede along the corridor. Nita seemed to be waiting also. He heard her robes rustling as she crouched next to him.

"Yes, Harry. I should have gone to Hogwarts. But I didn't. I was kidnapped. I lived in an orphanage. I went to live in Sweden and was adopted by Anna and Nils Anderssen. I've made my peace with it all. Can you truly say you've made your peace with what's happened?" He started to say something, but she continued before he could put his thoughts into words. "I'm not saying you *should* have made peace already. I'm just saying — yeah, there are some things you're going to think about for the rest of your life. Things you could have done differently." He swallowed, thinking for a moment of Cedric, of disarming his mother, of leaving the room when the Cho was hurling herself against Jeffries' window... "But you can't go change what's happened, so it's no use agonizing over what you *didn't* do, is it? *Why* do you think Ginny is so upset, Harry?"

He was tired of being lectured. "I don't want to talk about it. I'll just wait here for Professor McGonagall."

She stood and made a huffing noise. "You're as stubborn as Severus."

He frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I've had the chance to get to know him a little, now that he's going to be marrying my sister. All I can say is that my sisters seem to have a remarkable talent for finding the most *stubborn* men possible."

Harry snorted. "Oh, yeah. Sam Bell isn't stubborn. And I'm a purple hippogriff."

"It's not that Sam's *stubborn*. He's just — set in his ways", she said defensively. "Listen, Harry, I have to go. Please don't be so hard on her —"

"Hard on her! Just because I don't think it's right to try to undo this I'm being hard on her? Didn't you just tell me you shouldn't try to undo some things?"

"You restored someone to life who died perfectly willingly, Harry. And as far as Ginny is concerned, I mean — try to understand what she's going through, that's all. Please?"

She didn't wait for an answer but marched away from him, the tattoo of her shoes on the stone flags echoing in the distance while he sat on the cold, hard floor and waited for Professor McGonagall to lead him back to the Gryffindor common room.

* * *

That night they didn't engage in pretense. Hermione and Ginny climbed the stairs with Ron and Harry. Neville had gone home to visit his family; his grandmother had been frantic when she'd heard what he'd done during the battle with the giants and had insisted on his coming home until the memorial. Dumbledore was getting a lot of similar requests, all of which were granted. It wasn't as though the students were missing lessons.

As they climbed into his bed together, Harry was aware of a soft thud on the mattress. "Um, Hermione? Ron? One of your cats is on my bed. Not that I mind. Just — if you were looking for —"

"No, Harry. That's MacKenzie", Ginny told him.

"Oh, right. I forgot about her." He heard another small body land on the bed.

"And Bainbridge", she added. "Jules Quinn's cat. Remember, she's Argent and MacKenzie's mummy. I've been taking care of her since — since Jules can't anymore", she said, her voice sounding very close to breaking.

He swallowed. "Oh, of course. That's fine. Let's — let's just get some sleep."

He felt a weariness more of the soul than body, though, and long after she had fallen asleep, curled against him, his arm around her waist, he continued to listen to the noises of the night, punctuated by her breathing, as well as Ron and Hermione's deep, even breaths.

Although he could no longer see, he couldn't help seeing in his mind's eye a million images: Riddle cursing Ginny, Draco jumping between him and Ginny, his sister standing on the front steps of Hogwarts, his mother gazing expectantly at him... He couldn't sleep, so he couldn't dream, but it seemed that he was condemned to dream while he was yet awake...

A shower is what I need, he finally decided. Something to clear my head.

He carefully extricated himself from Ginny and the two cats and crept from the room, not bothering with his dressing gown. He felt his way across the landing and entered the communal bath, hearing the magic candles spring to life when his presence triggered the spells. *Not much bloody point to that, is there?* he thought, feeling as though a finger of ice had touched him, making him shudder for a moment.

He hung his pajama trousers on a hook after patting the wall looking for it, then felt his way to the showers, turning on the water full blast. He stepped under the hot spray, feeling the warmth cascading over him, enveloping him. Then, without warning, the dam burst; the stoic facade he'd maintained all day collapsed as the sobs started punching their way out of his stomach and the tears ran down his cheeks, blending with the hot water. He screamed incoherently and pounded his fists on the tiled wall, rage and anguish pouring out of him. He kicked the wall, not caring how much it hurt, not caring that after striking the tiles repeatedly with his fists he was bleeding, the hot water making his wounds sting. He sank into a crouch in the corner of the shower stall finally, panting with exhaustion, still no closer to getting the suffocating feeling out of his chest.

What had he done?

"Harry?"

"Harry?"

Even above the racket of the water he could tell that the voices belonged to Ron and Hermione.

"Go away", he mumbled, running his hand down his face.

"Harry, what are you doing to yourself? You're bleeding all over the place —" Hermione said reasonably.

"Here, mate, get dressed and go to bed, get some sleep —" Ron said nervously.

"How did you know I was in here?"

"How did we know?" Ron said, sounding incredulous. "The way you were bellowing?"

"Even I heard a little something", Hermione said. "Well, mostly because Ron woke me up and asked me if I could hear it, too. Ginny's still asleep."

He could feel Ron handing him a towel. Harry took it reluctantly, wrapping it around himself, but as he was doing this, the sobs started to come again.

"Get out, Ron", he said abruptly, turning away from him. "Please."

"Harry —"

"Go! I don't want to —"

"All right, all right", he said, sounding reluctant, but perhaps seeing that Harry didn't want to bawl like a baby in front of him. "C'mon, Hermione —"

"She can stay", he said through his tears, surprising himself. He heard Ron's hesitant footsteps on the tile floor.

"Go on, Ron. I'll be fine. We'll be along. Don't worry", she added.

Harry heard Ron leave the room and he sank down onto the floor again, feeling worse than he ever had in his entire life, unable to stop the sobs rolling out of him. He felt Hermione settle herself next to him, but she didn't speak, just put her arm around his shoulder while he wept. When he felt cried out it was very quiet in the room. He sat up, pulling away from her a little. She evidently had her wand with her because he could feel it lightly touching his knuckles and he could hear her whispering the incantation to heal his wounds. He let her, not speaking, and when she was done she pulled his head to her shoulder again. He thought, yes, he could cry on Hermione, the way he used to with Jamie, but no more tears came now. He could feel nothing but hollowness inside.

"Are you also going to tell me to be more understanding of Ginny's feelings?" he said at length, feeling contrary.

"No", she said simply. "I think that your feelings are pretty important right now, too."

"You want to know why I gave up my eyesight for Draco Malfoy, don't you? You want to know how I could give up —" He took a great gulping breath. "— Quidditch and flying as a golden griffin and being able to just point my wand and cast a spell without worrying whether it's gone way off. You want to know how I could give up just walking down a corridor. How I could give up Apparating. I mean — how would I know whether I'd reached my destination? How would I know whether Muggles were standing about gawping at me? I can't even use Floo, can I? How would I know when to get out of the right grate?"

He stopped talking abruptly, waiting for her to answer. "Well, Harry, what were *you* thinking when you made the decision to give up your eyesight?" she finally said.

He swallowed with difficulty, shaking his head, tempted to laugh, except that he was afraid that it would be hysterical laughter, and that he wouldn't be able to stop.

"That's just it, Hermione. I didn't."

"What do you mean?"

"I never decided to sacrifice my eyesight. I decided to sacrifice something else, and when I got back — I was blind."

"So — the goddess took your sight instead of what you'd decided to give?"

"It looks that way. Pardon the expression."

She pondered this silently; he appreciated her silent company. After a while she finally spoke again. "What *did* you decide to give up, Harry?"

He hesitated for a moment before saying, "*My magic.*"

"Oh, Harry!" was her immediate reaction, hugging him tightly. "Then thank goodness she didn't take that! She must — she must have felt that the *willingness* to give it up was enough, and decided to take it easy on you... How on *earth* could you choose to give up your magic?"

He shook his head. "I couldn't think of anything else big enough, important enough. I mean — you're not like Ginny and Ron. You haven't always known you're a witch. You remember the moment you found out for the first time, like being given a gift, only it was the best gift in the world, the one thing that was going to change your life forever, make you special, make you *you*."

He felt her nodding. "That's true. I'll never forget that", she whispered.

"I mean — what kind of sacrifice — the kind you have to live with — could possibly be worth another person's *life*? And that was it, I thought." In his mind, he saw not the Draco Malfoy who had taken the Killing Curse for Ginny, but the boy lying on the bed in the tent, the boy who had given up his life force so that Tom Riddle could leave the diary. "But being blind — it's like being able to fly but having clipped wings, isn't it? How am I supposed to make a living? I'm willing to bet Owen Aberystwyth isn't going to want a blind Seeker playing for Wales. And Ginny — how can I ask her to be with me now?"

Hermione made a skeptical noise. "Don't be stupid, Harry. And *don't* be like Ron. *Ooh, I'm a werewolf, so you shouldn't be with me.* Codswallop."

"It's not the same thing, Hermione. This can't be solved by Ginny becoming an Animagus or my taking a potion once a month. On the other

hand —"

"What?"

"I think what I'm most afraid of is that she *won't* leave me, and I'll make her miserable..."

"More codswallop. You could never make her miserable, Harry."

"I did with you, didn't I? And Katie, too."

"Because when you were with both of us you were pining for Ginny. Don't be stupid."

"Stop saying that. It's redundant, since stupidity is my permanent state of mind now. Hopelessly stupid."

"Don't be — argh. Stop it, Harry. You're not stupid. You're just *behaving* stupidly."

He snorted. "As though there's a difference. Anyway, I think I have a good reason to be afraid of making Ginny miserable. When she was still quite large, Sandy said something..."

"What?"

When he told her, she was silent and thoughtful for a moment. "How far ahead do you think she was Seeing?"

"I'm not sure, but when Sandy was in the zoo, she said a python predicted what happened in the forest at the end of our sixth year. The prediction was about a year before that."

"Well, a year sounds about right. And you should be somewhat adjusted to all of this by then."

"But Hermione, I can't work, I can't do anything but impose on others."

"Nonsense, of course you can work. You could — you could teach. Professor Figg was only going to do one year. There's a job opening next term, and I'm sure Professor Dumbledore would jump at the chance to have you."

"Erm, I don't think so. Apart from the fact that I'd need someone else to read students' tests and essays for me, and I wouldn't be able to demonstrate counter-curses and hexes without taking someone's head off, that would put me in the position of *teaching* Ginny, which I don't think is a good idea. Maybe it's something I'd consider eventually — but not next term."

"You'd manage the spell-casting with some help from your students. And you're wrong about the reading; there's a simple spell to put on a parchment or book to get it to read itself to you. How do you think I've

read *Hogwarts, A History* so many times? It's very soothing to listen to while I'm taking a bath... But at any rate, you do have a good point about being Ginny's teacher", she conceded. "All right then, I have another idea. You already know the boss, it's work you've done for the previous two summers —"

He gave her a small smile. "I wonder why I didn't think of that?"

"Because you're too busy feeling sorry for yourself", she said briskly. "Not that you shouldn't, necessarily. I'm just saying it's preoccupying you at the moment. You don't necessarily need your sight to do gardening, do you?"

He thought about this. "A lot of it *can* be done by feel", he admitted. "If Aberforth is all right with it —"

"There you go!" she said. "You always liked working for him, didn't you?"

He nodded. "I should have known you'd think of something..."

He felt her stand next to him. "I'm going back to bed. Get dressed and try to get some sleep, Harry. This will all take some getting used to, but —"

"Don't tell Ginny", he said suddenly.

"What?"

"About — about what I was going to sacrifice. Don't tell Ginny. Or Ron. Or anyone, for that matter. Just — don't. Please."

He heard her sigh deeply. "All right. I promise."

"Thank you."

Hermione left but he remained seated on the floor, thinking. His hand moved automatically to the amulet he still wore, and when his hand was wrapped around it, grasping it tightly, he saw Ginny lying in his bed bathed in moonlight, the tawny-striped mother cat curled up at her feet with her black-haired daughter in a tight furry circle next to her. He gasped, realizing for the first time that he hadn't touched the amulet since returning from the realm of the dead. *I can still see Ginny!* he thought excitedly. He grasped the amulet so tightly he could feel the basilisk image imprinting itself on his palm. *Ginny, Ginny, Ginny...*

Somehow, though, he was glad he had waited. Seeing her in repose like this he could take; seeing the anguish on her face when he returned... he wasn't sure he had missed anything by not seeing that. Her hair had fallen away from her brow as she slept and he could see the lightning-bolt wound

on her smooth skin; he instinctively reached up to feel his own scar with his left hand, still grasping the amulet. *You could never make her miserable, Harry.* He certainly hoped Hermione was right. It was the last thing in the world he wanted. He needed to keep his chin up and learn to cope, convince her he was all right. She could never know what he had meant to sacrifice. As hard as he was finding his new life, he knew he'd done the right thing. After learning that Draco Malfoy had been in hell, he was more convinced than ever. But that wasn't automatically going to make coping easier.

After he dried himself and dressed again, he padded back to the dormitory and climbed into bed with Ginny, who turned over in her sleep so that her arm and leg were thrown over him. He put his arm around her tightly, thinking about what Sandy had said. Holding onto the amulet with his other hand, so that he could see the two of them in his mind's eye, he finally drifted into a dreamless sleep.

From the Ruins

"*You shall see.*"

Harry had been about to give the password to the gargoyle outside Professor Dumbledore's office; he stopped, jolted. "I'll see?" he asked her.

"*Yes, Harry Potter. You shall understand.*"

"Oh", he said, deflated. *That* kind of seeing. He'd been unaccountably excited for a moment, even though he'd already said that it wouldn't be right for his vision to be fixed in any way. He was glad to have Sandy back, after Snape had revived her with some obscure potions, but her predications all seemed to have double meanings lately, which was making his head hurt.

Ginny squeezed his arm. "Are you all right, Harry? I think Professor Dumbledore will be able to explain why he waited to see you."

He nodded, gave the password, and she entered with him. The sensation of rising on the spiral staircase without being able to see anything was a peculiar one. When they reached the door, Ginny placed his hand on it and brushed her lips across his.

"I'll see you later, Harry."

There are so many meanings for "see", he thought, listening to her descend the stairs. Only when he could tell that she was really gone did he turn and feel for the griffin-shaped knocker, hitting the door with it just once. He wasn't sure how he felt about Dumbledore at this moment, but he wasn't feeling inclined to be very forgiving for his having made him wait two days before seeing him.

"Enter."

Harry opened the heavy door and slowly entered the headmaster's office. He could hear the whirring and chiming of the delicate silver instruments Dumbledore kept there. Harry moved tentatively, afraid to knock into something, and suddenly barked his shin on a hard knee-high piece of furniture that, upon investigation, turned out to be a chair. *You could bloody well give me some help*, he thought irritably, sitting down rather awkwardly.

"Good, Harry, very good. You are learning to cope a bit already." His voice was entirely too cheerful for Harry's taste.

"That's all you have to say?" Harry snapped, his shin still smarting.

"Well, as I said at breakfast, I do apologize for not meeting with you before now, but I have been kept quite busy doing my duty by the families who have lost loved ones, and those unfortunates who were quite severely injured." He paused. "I am sorry to say that I have just received an owl concerning Colin Creevey." He sighed deeply and said, "Mr. Creevey has breathed his last. He fought quite valiantly for the last two days, but —"

Harry swallowed, remembering Colin's open, enthusiastic face, his unflagging cheerfulness. "I'm sorry to hear that, sir", he said very softly. He felt like a small, petty person now. He'd been intending to whinge about Dumbledore not caring about his blindness, but when all was said and done, he wasn't in the infirmary or St. Mungo's, and he'd only lost his sight because he cast the Enuma Elish spell. He'd *decided* to do that, even if he hadn't consciously decided to give up his sight.

"I think that the first thing I should do is tell you something about myself that only my brother Aberforth knows now. Even the staff here at the school do not know what I am about to tell you, and everyone else who knew has long since died..."

Harry sat up straight, wondering what it could possibly be. "Yes, sir?" he said, waiting to hear what Dumbledore had to say. He felt some of his hostility ebb away.

"Harry, what I wanted to tell you is this: I was born blind."

It took Harry a few moments to digest this. He frowned and finally said, "*What?*" He was unable to muster a more coherent response, he was so shocked. He could hear Dumbledore chuckle and found it impossible *not* to picture his bright blue eyes twinkling in amusement. *Blind?* How could Dumbledore be *blind*? "But — but sir —"

"Yes, Harry, I daresay you are confused. Let me explain. When I was born, my eyes had a sort of white film on them. That is why my parents named me Albus, in fact. I was completely blind, due to an illness my mother contracted while she was carrying me. My parents were Muggles, remember."

Harry swallowed, his head whirling. "But — but you've never seemed blind! So many times you've been looking right at me and —"

"I did not say that I was *still* blind, Harry. I said that I was *born* blind. The summer that I was eleven years old, we were visited by the deputy headmaster of Hogwarts, a Professor Blythe. He informed my parents that

I was a wizard and a place was waiting for me at Hogwarts. *They* informed him, however, that schooling was out of the question for me, as I had been blind from birth. Professor Blythe was undeterred by this; he explained to them that I could, with their permission, receive powerful magical eyes that would give me sight for the first time. They were thrilled of course, as was I.

"Professor Blythe took me off to St. Mungo's to get my eyes, which he said would be a lovely twinkling blue, not that I had any way of knowing yet what 'twinkling' or 'blue' was. Now, although they were rarely used, magical eyes *had* been developed by then that were on the order of Alastor's, except that they looked a little more natural than his. Alastor wanted one that did *not* look natural. Auror's advantage, you know, unnerve the enemy. At any rate, after I received my eyes, I could see, but not as most people saw. It is possible, over time, to learn to control what one sees with magical eyes, but I was very young. When I received them I had not yet even gone to Ollivanders to get a wand and didn't know the first thing about controlling my magic. I could see through several layers of wood, through bone, stone walls, lead, and of course, clothing..."

He cleared his throat, and Harry remembered Parvati being rather disturbed by the ersatz-Moody's magical eye at the Yule Ball. He also remembered Mercy telling him about her eyes, recent developments that made it possible for her to see the world in a normal way without needing to make an effort.

"Well, you can see how this would be a problem for an eleven-year-old boy, I imagine", Dumbledore said, chuckling for a moment; Harry again imagined those blue eyes twinkling. "Or rather, how the headmaster and my teachers would think it a problem. I thought it was wonderful, naturally. I managed to get up to quite a lot of mischief at the beginning of my first year, until my head-of-house came up with a solution." Harry tried to imagine a very young Dumbledore getting into trouble because of his magical eyes, but failed; he simply could not imagine him as anything other than an adult, whether with his familiar white hair or the auburn hair Harry had seen when he'd gone into Riddle's diary.

"He experimented with magical spectacles of various strengths", Dumbledore explained, "but these were not ordinary spectacles, designed to make the wearer see *more* clearly. These were designed to *block* much of what I could see with my magical eyes, to make me see more like the

other people around me. They worked, and I was duly ordered to keep them on during all of my waking hours. The teachers and prefects were told that that young trouble-making Albus Dumbledore was to receive a detention and lose house points if he was caught not wearing his spectacles..." He chuckled again; Harry had a feeling that when he was a boy he had not always followed this rule.

"But sir", he said, thinking about the ramifications of this, "if you were wearing the sort of half-moon spectacles you have now, you could easily just look over them any time you —"

"Ah, but at the time I had large, round spectacles, rather like the ones you had when you arrived here, Harry. Yes, you are quite correct about how convenient it is to look *over* my current spectacles to see what is *really* going on here in the castle; in fact, I created these from my old glasses on the day I was hired to teach here so that it would be easier for me to keep an eye — or two — on the students." There was a sly tone in his voice. "When I choose not to be distracted by the many things I can see, I look through my spectacles. I could just control my eyesight with some concentration, but I have chosen to dedicate my powers of concentration to other things, and this way I need only glance up to see a great many things..." Harry shook his head, thinking of Dumbledore's *penetrating* gaze. It was far more penetrating than Harry ever imagined. And if his eyes were like Moody's eye, that also meant —

"You can see through Invisibility Cloaks!" Harry cried, the realization washing over him.

Dumbledore laughed. "Of course I can, Harry. You didn't think I would have given you something that would make it possible for you to hide from me, did you? Your father never knew. You see, Harry, I reckon that a certain amount of sneaking about the castle late at night *will* go on. It is a given. But one must have some rules and penalties, so it does not get out of hand. A certain amount of sneaking about is usually quite harmless, after all, but my eyes give me an advantage over sneaky, crafty students. Thus, I saw no harm in giving you your father's cloak. If I wanted to know what you were up to or feared that you would endanger yourself, I would still be able to learn about it. And while the sneaking about would probably dwindle to almost nothing if students realized that I had magical eyes, as they would fear discovery, I prefer to keep that my little secret."

Harry frowned, a thought at the edge of his brain... Finally, he knew what he'd been trying to remember. "You saw us! Me and Ron. We were under the Invisibility Cloak in Hagrid's hut when Fudge came to take him away to Azkaban, when we were in second year... You looked right at us, and I was certain that the Invisibility Cloak had stopped working, but Fudge didn't see us, so I thought I was just being paranoid. And when Malfoy came to tell you that you'd been kicked out by the board of governors, he didn't see us either... But you knew we were there all along! The things you said..."

"Yes, Harry. In fact, I worried that I had said too much, that you two would work out my little secret..."

"Hermione would have done, if she'd been there", Harry said, feeling a little disgruntled. "She worked out that Remus was a werewolf long before we found out..."

Dumbledore gave a very small laugh. "Yes, I daresay that Miss Granger would have worked it out, had she seen me looking in your direction and heard what I'd said."

Harry was confused. "But what I don't understand is — why tell me now?"

"You are almost ready to leave school, Harry. You are my Head Boy. And — and I wanted to reassure you about your — situation."

"My blindness, you mean", he said, his voice hard.

"Yes, your blindness", the headmaster agreed, as though it weren't a life-changing thing for Harry. "You see, I lived for over eleven years without seeing the world at all. My parents thought I was destined to be a burden on them for the rest of their days. They never said that to me, but I developed quite good hearing and none of their 'private' conversations were really terribly private..."

"Your hearing!" Harry exclaimed. "That's how you heard the ticking bomb at Azkaban, and why you heard the giants in the forest when they were heading toward the castle..."

"Yes, and I was afraid that someone like our Miss Granger would again work out the truth behind my eyesight because of those things. I still have remarkably good hearing, especially considering my age, which was also very useful to me when I became the Transfiguration teacher. I suggest that you begin to practice the art of being truly still and *listening*, Harry, so

that your ears can help you perceive the world more fully. Your hearing will never take the place of your eyes, of course, but —"

"Yeah, well it would also help me if a lot of people didn't think I was *invisible* when I'm *not* using a cloak." He told Dumbledore about Dr. Chaudhri's examination and her initial diagnosis. Dumbledore cleared his throat and sounded thoughtful.

"Well, that is very interesting indeed. Why do you think she came to that conclusion?"

"Why? Because she doesn't know what she's doing. And I'm really not sure why you thought telling me you were born blind would help me", he said grumpily. "You didn't *stay* blind, you had a chance to see, with the help of magical eyes. I don't have that opportunity. And even if I did —"

"— you wouldn't want it", Dumbledore said quietly. "You don't think it would be right."

Harry swallowed, crossing his arms on his chest. "Well, no I don't. Even if I am a bit —"

"— remorseful? Regretful?"

"Having trouble — adjusting. I — if this were easy —"

"— then it wouldn't be a sacrifice. You're quite right, Harry. And while it is something you will have to live with — well, perhaps there is a part of you that feels that it *shouldn't* be easy, or convenient."

Harry's throat felt tight. "Right", was all he could manage to say.

He heard Dumbledore rise and walk around the desk. "Bringing back Mr. Malfoy..."

Harry shook his head. "You can't say anything the others haven't already. I shouldn't have messed about with life and death, he wasn't worth it, I should have left him dead, he's an insufferable pillock. I know he is. But — but he —"

"Harry. Calm down. I was not going to attack you. I think I have a fairly good idea why you did it. As someone who was recently responsible for a number of deaths, I rather wish I could say that there was a life I had kept from being snuffed out —"

His voice sounded unspeakably tired and *old*, which alarmed Harry. "But sir! You did save lives! The giants killed so many people, and you —"

"Exactly. I couldn't seem to find a way to defeat them *and* keep them alive. You may not agree, Harry, but I count that as a failure. Yes, lives

were probably saved by the giants' drowning. Miss Kirkner's solution was extreme — but probably the only way. I do not fault her for her quick thinking and pragmatism. Sometimes..." He sighed deeply. "I once had great hopes for the giants, that they would want to work for the good. But Hagrid's mother and her friends were the only ones who felt compelled to do that." He swore briefly and softly, under his breath. "I do hate being wrong about these things."

"You — you wanted to believe in them. You believe in people. You believed in Draco Malfoy, and you were right about him, weren't you? He was doing everything he could to try to fight Voldemort, even though he had the Obedience Charm on him."

"Yes, he truly was. And he could speak to no one about it. He was quite alone, isolated, and yet he still found the strength to do the right thing, even though he knew he would probably be vilified for appearing to be a traitor."

Harry swallowed. "I couldn't just let him die and be honored in death for what he did. I felt — I felt that he deserved to live, to be honored while alive, to have this be the beginning of a new life, not the last hurrah of his old one."

He heard the rustle of Dumbledore's robes and then felt his hand on his shoulder. "A very noble motive, Harry, to be sure. And one day I think he may be truly grateful to you for giving him this opportunity, this new beginning. When he has got past —"

"What?"

"Well, past the burden of being a hero. You know yourself that it is a not-inconsiderable burden. I fear that Mr. Malfoy is quite ill-prepared for what is to come..."

"You've already talked to him, have you?" Harry said through gritted teeth. *Talked to him but not to me.*

"Yes, Harry. I thought it wise. I needed to learn everything he knew, as we are still unearthing Death Eaters, and he was able to lead us to Miss Kirkner's poor mother. He also requested a bit of privacy, so I arranged other quarters for him for the remainder of the term. I have thus far managed to keep him away from the public eye, but it has not been easy. The press are clamoring to speak to him — and to you and Miss Weasley. They will no doubt persist after the term is over. What plans do you have for the summer?"

"Well, I thought — I hoped to ask your brother for a job."

He heard the headmaster laugh. "I think Aberforth would like that a great deal. And he will need someone else now that Sam is leaving him."

"He is!" Harry said in surprise. "Because of Nita? What, a gardener isn't good enough for her?" He bristled on Sam's behalf, thinking about the way the Anderssens and Malfoys probably brainwashed her when she was young.

"Oh, no, not at all. He has decided to return to being an Auror."

Harry's jaw dropped. "That's brilliant!"

Dumbledore made a noise of agreement. "Sam was a fine Auror in his day. He will be a valuable addition to the ranks. Especially considering —"

"— the people who died at Godric's Hollow", Harry said softly.

"And during the prison break, as well. Several guards at the Ministry were killed by another who was working for Voldemort. That was how the escape from the Ministry cellblocks was accomplished." He sighed, sounding old and tired again. "So, Harry. You can honestly say that you are satisfied with the way everything has turned out?"

Harry swallowed, thinking about Ginny, about Draco Malfoy being alive and starting a new phase of his life; he thought about Ron and Hermione being all right, about Sirius marrying Alicia and Snape marrying Maggie. He thought also about Fred and Hagrid being dead, as well as Seamus, Colin, Tony, Parvati and her sister...

"Reasonably, I reckon. I wish so many people hadn't died, and I've already heard people saying, 'If he was going to bring back anyone, why couldn't it have been —'"

"Yes, yes, that will persist for a while, no doubt. Well, there's no way around it, you *did* play god, Harry. You decided who was to live and die. It's not something to take lightly. No one can do that and *not* be second-guessed. At least *you* saved someone who sacrificed himself for another person, which led to the fall of the Dark Lord. When I saved Tom, as a young man... well, look what came of that..."

"You hoped he could make something of himself!" Harry said, awed that the headmaster was revealing his feelings over what he'd done.

"Yes, I did, and if I was confronted with another young man in a similar situation, I'd do the same thing again. If you had it to do over, would you save Mr. Malfoy again?"

Harry thought about it, remembering the look on Draco's still face, the wide-open, staring eyes, his features frozen in shock. He also thought of the boy in the tent who had spent his life-force to help Harry fix the timelines...

"Yes, sir", he said resolutely. "Yes, I would."

* * *

The wizarding world had been in an uproar for a week solid. The copies of the *Daily Prophet* that reached the school indicated that non-stop parties were the rule and not the exception in Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley, and even the Muggle newspapers Hermione's parents sent her had stories of showers of owls and shooting stars. Different stories were circulating about which studio was trying to promote their new film with these stunts, with everyone denying the allegations. (This did not deter reporters from declaring it to be specific producers who had ordered the publicity stunts.)

A week had passed since the two battles and the memorial was finally being held on the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch for the fallen; Harry hoped this would serve to remind people that it wasn't just a time to celebrate the fall of Voldemort, but to mourn those who'd fought the good fight and lost their lives. He had gone over what he was going to say many, many times, with Ginny's and Hermione's assistance, until he had everything perfectly memorized. When they were getting ready in the common room, he'd said to her, "So, I'll get up, cast the Sonorous charm on my throat —"

"Oh, no, you needn't do that", Hermione had told him. "Professor Snape said that would be really tedious, every speaker casting the spell and taking it off. He enchanted a little piece of carpet on the podium. When you stand on it, everything you say is amplified so everyone can hear you, and when you step off it, your voice sounds normal again."

He'd agreed that that was a better idea. He was wearing the clothes Mrs. Weasley had given him to take his N.E.W.T.s, to which he'd had Hermione pin his Head Boy badge. She'd also insisted on pinning his Order of the Phoenix and Order of Merlin, Second Class on him as well, as she was wearing hers and Ginny was also wearing her prefect badge and Order of the Phoenix, and Ron was also wearing his O.P. and O.M. (Hermione had done that one for him, so he wouldn't need to touch the silver). Harry assumed that Draco Malfoy would be wearing his prefect badge and O.P. also. When Hermione told him to stop fussing and fidgeting, he felt a bit grumpy and answered, "Yes, Mum."

"Very funny."

Following the teachers, Harry and Hermione were to lead the students into the stadium, Head Boy and Girl. Harry felt the difference in textures when they reached the soft sand of the track around the pitch where he used to run every morning, something he hadn't done since the battle. He missed it, the feeling of running, nothing in his way, no worries about stumbling or bumping into something. He tried not to think longingly about the running as Hermione led him up the steps to the top of the stands, where they were sitting. He'd been busy hoping that he didn't look awkward, but when he overheard furtive whispers on the way up, his physical grace or lack thereof was not what they were discussing.

"There he is!"

"Yes, blind as a bat."

"Draco Malfoy?"

"That's what I heard."

"What about magical eyes?"

"That's probably what he'll do."

"I should think so. There's no reason for Harry Potter to be blind..."

He had tried to ignore them. There was a general rumble of human bodies settling, bodies nervous about what was to come. It promised to be an emotional day and he was glad he'd thought to put several handkerchiefs in his pockets. So far, however, his eyes were dry. He felt strangely drained of emotion as he listened to the stadium fill. Hermione told him that hundreds of chairs had been set up on the pitch itself, to augment the seating in the stands, as even the parents of Muggle-born students were invited, including hers. He clutched the amulet, seeing Ginny sitting with Lucy Bailey, the surviving fifth-year Gryffindor prefect. Lucy's counterpart, Karl Fauth, was in St. Mungo's, awaiting a new arm to replace the one he'd lost battling the giants. Lucy's blonde hair blew in the breeze, dark circles under her blue eyes. Ginny was sniffing into a handkerchief while Lucy put her head on Ginny's shoulder. Their prefect badges glittered in the sunlight, and the fire on Ginny's Order of the Phoenix badge flickered regularly, left, right, left, right.

Harry had continued to share his bed with Ginny, but even when Ron and Hermione had decided to move to the seventh-year girls' dormitory for some privacy (Lavender had still not come back from St. Mungo's), he did not turn to her in the night. Harry had thought, once or twice, that Ginny

might want to do something when they were alone, something to lose themselves in physical feeling, a way of forgetting, but he'd tried that before, when Dudley had died, and had found it to be monumentally useless. Afterward he'd felt awful for trying to use Hermione to beat back the disturbing dreams about seeing Dudley leap from his Smeltings dormitory, Wormtail turning into a dragon with Draco Malfoy's voice, then finding himself at Godric's Hollow with Ginny, who turned into a skeleton...

He'd never understood the image he'd seen in that dream of the ruined Hogwarts, but now he reckoned it was a kind of warning, rather than a prediction. The giants *had* tried to pull the castle down, and had succeeded in half-destroying two of the towers.

The crowd sounds began to ebb and diminish; silence gradually descended upon the stadium. Dumbledore was to begin, but he waited for a long minute, letting them all listen to the twittering of the birds, feel the breeze blowing. Finally, he began to speak.

"Welcome friends, to this time of remembering, mourning, and celebration", he said slowly and solemnly. The last word surprised Harry, but Dumbledore went on. "We shall be remembering those who fell, and mourn them, but we shall also celebrate their lives and their bravery, as well as the bravery of those who fought and survived. Let not one of the fallen be forgotten for a moment; for they were all heroes of the highest order", he said firmly. "Reading the names of the fallen students from both the Battle of Hogwarts and the Battle of Godric's Hollow will be our Head Girl, Miss Hermione Granger."

Hermione stood and he heard the rustle of her robes as she approached the podium. Even amplified, her voice sounded very small. "Hannah Abbot", she began, "seventh year, Hufflepuff. Barry Bagshot, third year, Gryffindor..." He could tell that she was trying to keep her voice steady, but it wobbled occasionally; Harry wondered whether she would make it to the end. As each name was read, he heard sobbing start somewhere, sometimes near, sometimes far away. "Mandy Brocklehurst, seventh year, Ravenclaw. Colin Creevey, sixth year, Gryffindor", she choked out. Harry couldn't help the tears that stole into his own eyes as he remembered little Colin following him with the camera that had saved his life, even though he *was* petrified. No camera had saved him this time.

Harry thought she might need to stop altogether when she reached the Patils: "Padma Patil, seventh year, Ravenclaw. Parvati Patil, seventh year, Gryffindor..." She seemed to have a very bad head-cold now and was barely able to say the last few names. When she finally sat down again, Harry reached for her hand and squeezed it; she put her head on his shoulder and gave a brief sob; he handed her a handkerchief, not knowing what else to do.

"And now", Dumbledore said, "we shall be have a musical selection in honor of our fallen students. We have not had a school choir in many years, but a number of students volunteered to form a choir for this memorial. I think that you shall all recognize the selection; you are invited to join in on the final stanza if you wish."

The orchestra struck up the introduction and Harry's throat tightened when he heard it. There was a low rumble of the students getting to their feet; the brass in the orchestra blared a fanfare and then the young voices were lifted in song, taking Harry back a year in time, as he stood on the parapets of the castle, preparing to take the members of the Dueling Club into battle...

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?*

He remembered the feeling of solidarity among the students as the fifteen Dueling Club members flew into the forest for Snape and Malfoy, the sight of the others on the parapets, waiting, not knowing whether they would need to throw in their lot with the first fifteen...

The orchestra played an interlude and then, on his own, Will Flitwick's unmistakable voice piped up, singing the second verse. Harry remembered young Will standing up for him in the Great Hall, when others believed he had done something to Professor Flitwick and Cho Chang. His clear young voice echoed around the stadium; when he was done a brass fanfare preceded the last verse. The multitude sang now, voices full and strong:

*Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental fight:
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.*

The orchestra finished the final fanfare and there was a moment of silence, followed by the muffled rumble of the choir sitting. Dumbledore spoke once more, this time about the teachers who fell in the Battle of Hogwarts: Professor Trelawney and Hagrid. Maggie stepped to the podium to eulogize Trelawney, while Dumbledore himself spoke of Hagrid.

"...Rubeus Hagrid's soul of generosity was as large as he was", Dumbledore said at the end, "and if I ever again have so great and loyal a friend, I shall be very fortunate indeed." His voice sounded strained to Harry. After a pause, he said, "Our Potions Master, Severus Snape, shall honor us and the memories of his colleagues with a musical selection." Harry swallowed, wondering what Snape was going to do. The orchestra began to play something that was vaguely familiar to him, and then the deep, strong voice of his stepfather boomed out into the stadium:

*The people that walked in darkness,
that walked in darkness,
the people that walked, that walked in darkness
have seen a great light, have seen a great light...
The people that walked,
that walked in darkness have seen a great light.*

Harry listened to him sing, the perfectly enunciated phrases and runs going up and down the scale; it seemed that every breath was held while he sang, as they listened and thought about the darkness in which they'd walked since Voldemort had returned...

*And they that dwell,
that dwell in the land of the shadow of death,
and they that dwell, that dwell in the land,
that dwell in the land of the shadow of death...*

The land of the shadow of death. Yes, Harry felt like he'd been living in the realm of the dead since the moment he dared open his eyes and look at Cedric Diggory's body. Perhaps that was really why it appeared to him that he'd gone to Hogwarts when he invoked Ereshkigal's realm; that also represented Death for him, the place where he lived every day. But now the entire world was a shadow to him...

*... upon them hath the light shined,
upon them hath the light shined.*

The orchestra finished, going lower and lower. *For a song with a message that's supposed to be cheerful, it sounds mournful enough,* Harry thought, although he couldn't deny that Snape sounded quite powerful and authoritative while singing it. He heard Snape move to sit and Dumbledore rise again, his robes rustling.

"Thank you, Professor Snape. And now, Eustace Bean, former head of Magical Law Enforcement and newly elected Minister for Magic —" Harry was jolted; he hadn't heard about this. "— will read the names of those Aurors who fell at Godric's Hollow." Harry remembered Bean's full, authoritative voice from Lucius Malfoy's trial; as he read the names, Harry

recognized the names of Aurors who had been imprisoned in Azkaban, men and women who had survived that only to be cut down before Harry's parents' old house. The stadium was very still while Bean read the names. When he reached the end and sat again, Dumbledore spoke once more. "And now we will have Miss Ruth Pelta, sixth year Gryffindor, singing Ravel's *Kaddish* in memory of the fallen of Godric's Hollow."

Harry heard Ruth making her way toward Dumbledore. When she began to sing, unaccompanied, her pure voice the only sound in the very still stadium, the hairs stood up on the back of Harry's neck; he remembered how she sounded at her father's synagogue, the clear notes dropping like pearls into still water... But suddenly, she began to falter, her voice wavering; he was near enough that he could hear her struggling for breath, and he whispered to Hermione, "*Help me. I need to get to her.*" They both rose and made their way toward Ruth, and when Harry had reached her, he put his arm around her shoulder, standing next to her on the podium, on the enchanted carpet. She was still struggling, but he joined his voice with hers, nodding at her, and together, they sang for the fallen, while the crowd listened in silence. Harry knew his voice wasn't up to Ruth's, but his support helped her regain her strength and push on. He knew she was really singing for Tony, and he didn't know how she had even sung as much as she had. When the echo of the last note had died out, they stepped away from the podium. Ruth hugged him tightly and he whispered to her, "*You'll be all right. Eventually.*"

He felt her lips brush his cheek and she said, "Thank you, Harry", with a choke in her voice. "I don't know how you knew that", she added, a note of wonder in her voice, "but — thank you." Hermione helped him to sit, then squeezed him around the shoulders.

"As if I wasn't already crying non-stop, you had to do *that*, Harry", she half-sobbed.

"She taught me that", he whispered to her. "Learning it... that was how I mourned Jamie... I can never really thank her for that..."

"I think you just did", Hermione told him, patting his hand.

Dumbledore was at the podium again, thanking Ruth and Harry for singing and announcing that Eustace Bean was going to give some remarks. Bean returned to the podium with a heavy tread, cleared his throat and began to speak. Harry was appalled. Although Bean started off talking about what a dreadful year it had been, the many witches and

wizards working for the Ministry who had fallen, his voice swung up as he promised the people, "— and I will continue to dedicate myself, as Minister for Magic, to eradicating all Death Eaters and guaranteeing the safety of each and every person in wizarding Britain!" There was enthusiastic shouting and stamping as the crowd roared its approval. Suddenly, it was no longer a memorial service, but a political campaign, it seemed to Harry. *You've already won*, he thought grumpily at Bean.

Bean continued, promising that no one who was even suspected of having supported Voldemort would be permitted a license to Apparate, that Veritaserum would be used in all future interrogations going forward, and that he would personally be overseeing the construction of New Azkaban. It would be built on the Isle of Drear, which was already unplotable. He would personally select the dangerous creatures experts who would subdue the Quintapedes living on the island, which would become part of the security measures taking the place of dementors. "...at least until we can find a way to approximate the effect of the dementors on the prisoners..." Harry choked in horror at these words.

"The Dark Lord no doubt thought it clever to try to draw off the headmaster and Head Boy and other trained duelists so that his giants could attack those left behind, the young and weak, just as the French did at Agincourt when they killed the unarmed boys who waited behind the battle lines for their knights to return."

Beside him, Hermione gave an indignant snort and whispered to Harry, "That's rubbish. There's no historical support for that. Shakespeare was just making things up when he wrote that in *Henry the Fifth*. And Neville and Dean are *not* younger and weaker. Nor were most of the Slytherins who were no help at all."

"Makes good propaganda, though, doesn't it?" Harry whispered back, feeling cynical.

She made a skeptical noise while Bean ranted on, saying that it must never be allowed to happen again, that to protect the children, Aurors would secure the school grounds, including the forest. "Never again will dangerous creatures camp on the very doorstep of Hogwarts and attack our precious children!" Harry bristled on Dumbledore's behalf; *he* wasn't to blame, but you wouldn't know it by what Bean said. Then Harry sat up to attention as Bean promised that the Ministry would also closely monitor *all* present and former *Slytherins*. He also vowed that the movements of

part-human magical creatures — especially werewolves and vampires — would be closely monitored. "The heroes of Hogwarts and Godric's Hollow will not have fallen in vain!" he cried. The cheering started up again. Harry's head was pounding; this was wrong, this was *all wrong*.

When the crowd started to quiet again, Dumbledore spoke; he had evidently returned to the podium. "Thank you, for — for that, Minister Bean", he said, not sounding thankful at all. "And now", Dumbledore went on, "we shall be honored with another musical selection from our Head Boy, Harry Potter, who will sing to the old Welsh tune *Ar Hyd Y Nos*. Our Head Girl, Hermione Granger, will accompany him on the cello."

Harry and Hermione stood and she led him to his place. He waited while she sat in the chair that was waiting for her, with her cello already tuned and ready. When he heard her *draw the bow* across the strings, he took a deep breath, his heart pounding very loudly in his ears while she played the too-brief introduction; he was very glad he didn't have to see the crowd looking at him while he did this. Instead, he pictured his mother at his brother's bedside, and his sister, seeing again her pale, anguished face at their little brother's funeral:

*God, that madest earth and heaven,
Darkness and light;
Who the day for toil hast given,
For rest the night;
May Thine angel guards defend us,
Slumber sweet Thy mercy send us;
Holy dreams and hopes attend us,
This livelong night.
And when morn again shall call us
To run life's way,
May we still, whate'er befall us,
Thy will obey.
From the power of evil hide us,
In the narrow pathway guide us,
Nor Thy smile be e'er denied us
The livelong day.*

*Guard us waking, guard us sleeping,
And when we die,
May we in Thy mighty keeping
All peaceful lie;
When the last dread call shall wake us,
Do not Thou, our God, forsake us,
But to reign in glory take us
With Thee on high.*

Harry felt he could not go on several times, but he pictured Jamie valiantly singing in the graveyard and plunged on, even when his voice broke on the words, *Guard us waking, guard us sleeping, And when we die...* Before he left the podium, he felt Dumbledore's hand on his shoulder; Harry nodded at him before following Hermione back to their seats.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter. And now, I did say that we would be celebrating some people here today as well. Minister Bean and I have a number of honors to bestow upon the living and dead heroes of Hogwarts and Godric's Hollow. First — the Order of Merlin, Third Class. Please wait to respond until I have finished."

As Dumbledore read the names, Harry felt a swell of pride every time he recognized one of the members of the Dueling Club, whether they were still living to get their award or it was being awarded posthumously, which was the case for many; when he said, "*Williamson Flitwick*", Harry didn't know who he meant for a moment, before he realized that he meant young Will. He swallowed, remembering Will at his first Dueling Club meeting; Harry had suspected he'd be a good choice, and he was right, even though Will was only in third year. He wished now that he could see the expression on Will's face, being given the Order of Merlin in his third year. It was probably quite a sight...

Harry was jolted when the applause began; he, unlike everyone else, had not seen the signal when Dumbledore raised his wand and permitted the crowd to vent their feelings. After the O.M., third class recipients returned to their seats, Dumbledore continued. "Receiving the Order of Merlin, Second Class..." Another list of names washed over Harry; most

of these seemed to be Aurors and teachers at Hogwarts, although there were some students. Millicent Bulstrode's was one of the first names, for fighting the other Slytherins and helping Mariah get into the lake to talk to the merpeople. Hermione's name was also called, and he remembered that she'd received the Order of Merlin, Third Class after the Azkaban rescue; now she had Second Class, like Harry and Ron. When Dumbledore read the last of the names, the applause went up again, a little louder now. Harry hugged Hermione when she returned to her seat.

"Now, then", Dumbledore said, "I believe many of you have been waiting to hear about the Order of Merlin, First Class. I will do the posthumous awards first, following with the awards for those still with us. These will not be in alphabetical order, and I will take a moment to explain exactly what each of the recipients did to warrant this honor..."

Among the posthumous recipients were Hagrid and Fred Weasley; Hermione stepped forward to accept Hagrid's on his mother's behalf, and Hermione told him that Mrs. Weasley went forward to receive Fred's, while she sobbed over Hagrid's award.

When Dumbledore finished the posthumous awards and moved on to those who were still living, Harry got a bit of a surprise: the first two recipients turned out to be Bill and Charlie Weasley! "*Bill and Charlie!*" Harry exclaimed in a whisper. "Did you know?"

"I just knew that they were going to tell us today what they've been up to. I didn't know it was going to be like *this*", she answered quietly.

Dumbledore explained that Voldemort had gained the support and trust of a number of vampires; Bill and Charlie had been doing dangerous work for months, with the assistance of a vampire friend from Romania. ("*Dimitri!*" Harry hissed at Hermione.) She squeezed his hand, which he thought probably meant *Shut up and listen*. Dumbledore said that on the day of the battles, Bill, Charlie and Dimitri succeeded in preventing the vampires who were expected at Hogwarts and Godric's Hollow from joining the battles; they imprisoned most of them and killed only in self-defense when any put up a fight.

When he was finished speaking, a roar of approval went up from the crowd; other Weasleys seemed to be responsible for a lot of the racket. (Dumbledore had not told the crowd to wait this time.) Bill, Charlie and Dimitri thanked Dumbledore, and Harry thought, *I should have known Bill and Charlie were doing something important*. He couldn't imagine

vampires joining either battle. It wouldn't have been hard for Voldemort to cast a spell to darken the sky by sending clouds before the sun. Then he thought about the fact that Dimitri was here (probably shrouded), a vampire receiving the O.M. for fighting other vampires, as Ron had done with the werewolves. Bean's rule about part-humans would likely negatively impact on Dimitri, too, unless he returned to Romania.

Dumbledore continued, "Next, I am quite pleased to honor a student who is finishing her sixth year. A prefect in Slytherin House, her quick thinking, ingenuity and good relations with the merpeople enabled us to subdue the giants and avoid further injuries and deaths. I am very pleased to award the Order of Merlin, First Class, to Miss Mariah Kirkner."

Harry was pleased for Bill and Charlie, but now he pounded his hands together even harder, shouting and whistling as well, feeling smug about Eustace Bean having to pin an O.M., First Class on a *Slytherin*. He didn't think it was a coincidence that Dumbledore had chosen to emphasize her house. The applause wasn't as enthusiastic as it had been for Bill and Charlie, but he kept pounding his hands together anyway.

He heard her thank Dumbledore, when she'd reached the podium, and he said sincerely, "No, thank *you*, my dear, thank *you*." When Mariah had left the podium, he spoke again. "And now — another Weasley. I have watched this young man grow from a boy who, in his first year was ready to sacrifice himself for the greater good and for his friends — as well as being quite a chess player — to a person who plunges into danger with no thought for his own personal safety, only for those he seeks to protect. He has shown his loyalty, bravery and ingenuity time and again, whether he is playing Quidditch for England, rescuing his Potions Master from an *Acromantula*, or battling fellow werewolves in unarmed, hand-to-hand combat. He went from being tortured at Godric's Hollow to performing a spell that allowed the Aurors and others present to subdue their opponents and secure a victory. He went in one day from being Lord Voldemort's hostage to one of the people responsible for the final victory over darkness. I am very pleased to award the Order of Merlin, First Class to Ronald Weasley."

Harry and Hermione jumped to their feet, clapping and shouting wildly. Ron thanked Dumbledore in a deep, clear voice and Harry wished there was some way for him to congratulate Ron right *now*. But that would have to wait. Dumbledore cleared his throat again and continued. "The

next recipient is the person with whom Ronald Weasley performed the spell that led to the Godric's Hollow victory. But before that, she was one of three people directly involved in the fall of Lord Voldemort. She suffered the Cruciatus Curse and was willing to die to defeat him. To this end, she used her knowledge of his youthful experiences to goad him into killing her — and when he took the bait and attempted this, his own spell backfired on him and he perished. For cunning and sheer nerve I am very pleased to award the Order of Merlin, First Class, to Virginia Weasley."

A roar shook the stadium and Harry and Hermione were on their feet again, clapping and cheering themselves hoarse. From here and there Harry heard cries of, "*The Girl Who Lived! The Girl Who Lived!*" He grinned and clapped until his hands were sore. At length, they sat again. Harry could faintly make out Ginny thanking Dumbledore and Bean. He wished he could see her face at this moment, then realized that he *could*; he grasped the amulet, seeing her standing beside the podium, shaking Dumbledore's hand, her face shining almost as much as the gold Order of Merlin badge on her robes. Harry could see Dumbledore beaming at her as he clasped her hand and suddenly he felt such a wave of love for her overcome him that he had to swallow and bite his lip to try to hold back his tears. *And she loves me, too*, he thought, suddenly quite amazed by it all.

He continued to hold his amulet as she tried to return to her seat, but the crowd would have none of it yet, continuing to cheer and stomp and clap. Harry heard Hermione laugh beside him. "To think, she used to be afraid to talk to you", she whispered to him. He watched Ginny duck her head and blush, finally edging away from the podium and trying to return to her seat; he remembered with affection the little girl who put her elbow in the butter dish, yet stood up to Draco Malfoy at Flourish and Blotts. The noise began to die down and when Dumbledore resumed speaking, Harry was jolted; he'd been so wrapped up in watching Ginny that he'd forgotten that Dumbledore still had awards to give.

"I was first made aware of this recipient's cunning and bravery when he worked to put his own father in prison for his Death Eater activities." Harry grinned; this was *exactly* the sort of reason he'd brought Draco back. Order of Merlin, First Class! That should change his life! Draco Malfoy, officially recognized as a hero. This was the new life Harry had wanted for him. It was beginning, and he felt his chest swell with more than a little

pride. *I helped it happen*, he thought. *He's here today, getting this — and not posthumously — because I brought him back.*

What Harry couldn't work out was why Draco had not spoken to him since they'd returned from Godric's Hollow. He'd sent Hedwig to him with a note written by Ginny, because Draco hadn't been eating in the Great Hall and Harry didn't know where the private quarters were that Dumbledore had arranged for him. He'd sent back a note to Ginny, not to him, saying that he had a lot to think about and wasn't meeting with anyone just now. Ginny wrote other notes for him to send, but he received no responses...

"Were it not for the actions of this person, Lord Voldemort might still be alive to terrorize the wizarding world", Dumbledore continued.

"Yeah, he probably only helped to get rid of him so he could take over himself!" a voice cried across the stadium. Harry was jolted; he couldn't imagine anyone speaking like that to Dumbledore *ever*.

"It is therefore with great pleasure", Dumbledore said, ignoring the heckler, "that I award the Order of Merlin, First Class, to Draco Malfoy."

Harry had the impression that he'd meant to say more, but had cut it short. Harry started clapping, as with the others, and heard Hermione clapping, but it seemed that only a small number of people present were doing likewise, and some were following the example of the person who'd already shouted about Draco wanting to take over as a Dark Lord himself. Harry heard some bitter voices in the stands below and somewhere ahead of him.

"Another stinking Slytherin getting the O.M.!"

"Now I've seen it all! Death Eaters should be kissed by dementors, not get the O.M.!"

"No more dementors, remember?"

"Then they should bring back the death penalty..."

Harry swallowed, trying to clap more loudly; Hermione grasped his hands, stopping him. *"No one else is clapping,"* she whispered.

Harry let his hands drop into his lap, dejected. *"What's happening?"* he asked quietly.

"Dumbledore is pinning the O.M. to Malfoy and shaking his hand. I think Malfoy's going to spew. He looks a bit green."

"He probably heard what some of these prats here were saying..."

"Probably." He couldn't tell from her matter-of-fact tone whether she agreed with the prats. She'd been clapping along with Harry at first, but that, he reasoned, was probably her usual polite reflex.

"And now, it gives me very great pleasure to give the following award. Now, although he is Head Boy of Hogwarts, he has not always been known for following the rules; in fact, he has probably received more detentions than any student I've ever known to become Head Boy — apart from his father." A laugh rolled through the crowd. "But what I find particularly remarkable about him is his capacity for justice and compassion. He will not hesitate to do what he thinks is right, whether that is the easy path or not. He is the third person who contributed to Lord Voldemort's fall, by using Voldemort's own self-confidence against him; he is the architect of the plan that eventually led to victory at Godric's Hollow; and finally, were it not for a great sacrifice he made, we would not have the previous recipient with us here today. I am most pleased to award the Order of Merlin, First Class, to Harry Potter."

His reception was nothing like the lukewarm response Draco Malfoy had received. He could hear shouting and cheering from all over the stadium, feet stomping, clapping that sounded like five times as many people as Harry knew were likely to be present. Hermione helped him to stand and make his way to the podium. When he reached it, he could feel Dumbledore pinning the O.M. to his robes and then reaching for his hand to shake it; the stadium shook from the uproar, and Harry decided that it had been useless to memorize his remarks, because now what he wanted to say to this crowd had nothing to do with what he'd prepared, and he was glad that his friends didn't know what he was going to say.

The crowd finally quieted again. Dumbledore, his voice still amplified, said, "And now we will hear a few words from Harry Potter." Harry felt him take his elbow as he stepped up onto the podium, trying not to shake, once again grateful that he couldn't see how many people were present. His heart was beating very fast and he almost wished he could just face down another dark wizard.

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore", he began, trying to keep his voice steady. "Thank you for a lot of things. Thank you for believing in your students, no matter what house they're in. Thank you for recommending Mariah and Draco and Millicent for the O.M., because they deserve it. Thank you for believing in Severus Snape and Arabella Figg and Alastor

Moody, all of them Slytherins when they were in school. But there's one thing that I can't thank you for: I can't thank you for continuing to use the Sorting Hat."

He heard a rumble of confusion roll through the crowd as he took a breath, preparing to continue. "When I was about to enter my first year, a few things happened that changed my life forever. That is, after I found out I'm a wizard. First, I met Draco Malfoy and took an immediate dislike to him." There was laughter at that, which was fine with Harry; he'd been trying to lighten the mood. "I first heard about school houses from Draco, about Slytherin and Hufflepuff. I didn't know what they were, so I asked Hagrid." His nose started itching fiercely when he thought of Hagrid. "He told me that there hasn't been a single wizard who's gone bad who *wasn't* in Slytherin. Now, I know that that isn't true. And Hagrid did too, but he wasn't thinking about exceptions that day. And then I was Sorted. When I put the Hat on, I was appalled. It told me that I could be great, and that the house that could help me do that could be — *Slytherin*."

Harry heard a gasp and paused for effect; he'd never thought to tell this many people such a deep, dark secret of his, but he knew that he could keep it a secret no longer. People *had* to know if a thousand-year-old tradition was to be changed. "Yes. Harry Potter, a Slytherin. It could have happened." *And did, in my other life*, he thought. "I'd been influenced by meeting someone who'd already been Sorted into Slytherin, someone I didn't like, and by what Hagrid — someone I *did* like — had said. Even before I heard the Hat's song or knew anything about Salazar Slytherin, I knew that the last thing I wanted to be was a *Slytherin*. Before the Hat said anything, I had already thought, '*Not* Slytherin, *not* Slytherin'. It wanted to know whether I was sure, and it finally put me in Gryffindor. I was enormously relieved to *not* be one of *them*."

Cheers went up from the crowd, which he wasn't expecting. He held up his hands to stop it and the noise died down again. "No, don't cheer. I was a stupid, ignorant prat. I didn't know anything about Slytherin but rumors and the opinions of a person I liked who was biased. And then, when I was in second year, I found out I was a Parselmouth. Slytherin was a Parselmouth, and some people thought it meant that I was his heir, that I'd opened the Chamber of Secrets. I wondered this myself. The heir part, that is. I told the headmaster that I was afraid it might be true, and maybe that was why the Hat had suggested Slytherin. I even asked the Hat whether I

was in the right house. But Professor Dumbledore told me that I'd *chosen* to not be a Slytherin, that it's our choices that make us who we are, rather than just our abilities. Our *choices*," Harry said again.

"I sat with Viktor Krum as he was dying in the forest last year; he told me that he had *no choice*. Once he knew Voldemort was his grandfather, he thought his future was settled, that his blood decided everything. He was wrong! What message do Slytherins get when they're Sorted? Do you think many of them feel they have a choice except to live up — or down, rather — to their house's reputation? It's a rare Slytherin who doesn't feel this way, like Mariah or Millicent or Severus Snape. Or Draco Malfoy. Are we helping an eleven-year-old to tell him, essentially, 'You're a Slytherin now, so you're just as likely as not to be an evil, evil person'. Does that sound like he has a *choice*?"

He stopped and listened now; the stands were utterly silent. "We have no right to take people's choices from them! When I was preparing for my N.E.W.T. in History of Magic, my good friend Hermione told me that it's a lie that house elves *like* to be enslaved. She'd learned the name of the wizard who first cursed the elves — yes, cursed, not 'charmed', which sounds rather friendly — into believing that doing anything but housework was horrid and that they should want to slave their entire lives for humans. The wizard who did it was a *Hufflepuff*, not a Slytherin. I charge the Ministry of Magic to lift the curse on the elves so that they can *choose* where they want to work — for pay. The Elven Army saved many lives at Godric's Hollow, and a good elf-friend of mine perished at Stonehenge, where elves also battled Death Eaters, and dragons and dementors, too."

"Lift the curse!" he heard Hermione cry. He heard Ginny's voice repeat the cry, then Ron's, and soon there was a stomping and clapping behind him that was starting to make him think the wooden stands would be shivered into kindling.

"*Free the elves! Lift the curse!*" the chant echoed through the stadium.

Harry bit his lip, remembering his promise to Dobby. He put his hands up to quiet the crowd again and continued. "Good! But don't just *say* it. *Make* it happen. Hold the new Minister to it. We do *not* have the right to enslave anyone, just because we *can* do it." He thought of something then, and went on, "Alastor Moody once said to me that just because you *can* do something doesn't mean you *should*. Just because Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff

and Gryffindor pacified Slytherin by using the Sorting Hat to give him the students who were like him doesn't mean we should go on that way.

"I charge the board of governors to *stop using the Sorting Hat*. When first years come to the school, put them *randomly* into houses. There can still be a house competition, and Quidditch and all that. But what good does it do to let children just be around those who are similar to them for *seven years*? How much of an education do they get if they don't learn how to get on with those who aren't *just like them*? And how many of us really feel, after seven years, that we're exactly the same person we were at eleven? We shouldn't be telling first years, 'This is who you are for the rest of your life'. Hogwarts should be about opening up possibilities, not closing them off."

He was still met with silence, so he barreled on. "If the Ministry wants to prevent the rise of future dark wizards, then make all students feel that they can be anything, regardless of house. It's *not* a solution to keep track of former Slytherins. At any rate, once the Hat is no longer used, 'Slytherin' won't mean what it once did. Now, I know that I said that when I first met him, I didn't like Draco Malfoy", he said, giving a small laugh. "But since then I've come to know a Draco Malfoy who is brave and selfless and puts his Slytherin cleverness to good use. If it weren't for him, Voldemort would still be here. If it weren't for Mariah Kirkner, Hogwarts, and probably Hogsmeade, too, would be destroyed, and Millicent Bulstrode helped with that. You were rather quiet when they received their awards, but this time I want to hear some *real* support for them. *To the Slytherin heroes of Hogwarts and Godric's Hollow!*" he cried, clapping loudly.

The crowd obliged him this time, stomping their feet and shouting for quite a while, and this time he didn't hear a single naysayer.

* * *

"*I now pronounce you husbands and wives.*"

Harry grinned upon hearing Dumbledore say these words, and the resounding kisses he heard told him that the brides and grooms were fairly happy about it as well. A fortnight after the memorial, the small crowd in the Hogwarts Trophy Room, largely consisting of Weasleys and some of the operatives, clapped and cheered. Harry found himself hugged and kissed by the brides, Maggie and Alicia, while the grooms, Snape and Sirius, shook his hand and patted his back. As the best man, he'd kept

checking his pocket for the rings, worried that it was a dreadful idea for them to have a blind best man. *I'd bloody well want my best man to see what was going on*, he thought, unable to get Sandy's prediction out of his mind, although he smiled and thumped Snape on the back in return and pumped Sirius' hand, all the while wishing he could see them both.

He spasmodically clutched at his amulet, wondering where Ginny was; there, he could see her on the other side of the room, standing and clapping with Ron, Hermione, Draco and Mariah. She wasn't in a dress like the one she'd worn for Alicia's wedding to Roger, she didn't have her hair up in some complicated style. Her simple rose-colored dress robes had no ornamentation and her hair fell down her back as usual. She laughed and clapped, her bright eyes crinkled up, and Harry's heart turned over. He didn't need her to be done up, he just wanted to see her like this always, looking like herself. On this day, he seemed to continually hear Sandy's deep voice in his head, from when she was enlarged:

The Lion shall wed the Daughter.

Perhaps it meant Sirius, who'd also been a Lion in the Prophecy? But Alicia wasn't the Daughter of war, and they were marrying *today*, not a year hence...

Bodies jostled him, and he put his hand out, asking, "I'm sorry, but whose arm is this?"

"Harry", came Maggie's voice.

"Sorry, Maggie", he said again. "I was just looking for someone who could help me get across the room to Ginny."

"We're going in that direction anyway, aren't we Severus?" she said to her groom, sounding quite proprietary now. He grinned at her.

"Got him on a bit of a lead, do you?"

"I'm not a dog, Potter", Snape growled, but Harry could hear that he was forcing the hostility; there was a note of amusement in his voice.

"No, you're not. You're a husband", he grinned. Snape gave a very satisfactory laugh.

But as they crossed the floor, Maggie reached into his mind and spoke to him, giving him a bit of a jolt. *What secret are you keeping, Harry, and from whom?*

Erm, whatever do you mean, Maggie? He'd almost forgotten she could do this.

Your aura color doesn't lie. You're black at the edges. Secretive, that's what you are. Confess.

Planning to become an Auror? he thought grumpily. *I've nothing to confess. I've done nothing wrong.*

I didn't say you had, apart from keeping a secret. You're keeping it from Ginny, aren't you?

He didn't answer her, but tried to concentrate on shutting his mind to her. He wasn't sure whether his aura color was due to his thinking about the prediction or the secret about what he'd intended to sacrifice. Perhaps both. He clutched the amulet and saw himself approaching Ginny from just a couple of feet away. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek, then he saw her hug and kiss Maggie, and her new brother-in-law even warranted a shy peck on the cheek, Snape looking rather awkward about it; after all, she was still his student for another year. Harry could also see Ron shaking hands with their Potions Master as though he hadn't been their nemesis for years, grinning at the newest member of the family, while Hermione took her turn hugging and kissing Maggie.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Ginny whispered in his ear, making him release the amulet. He held her tightly and nodded, not daring to speak. *Why does Maggie have to go seeing auras all the time?* he thought, feeling out of sorts.

The Trophy Room had been closed off for the private party, the cases in the middle of the floor having been cleared out of the way for dancing. Harry took off his amulet, holding it between his hand and Ginny's as they turned carefully around the floor. Holding the amulet to see her allowed Harry to avoid bumping into people, but it was strange to see *himself* at the same time, turning round and round. It reminded him of the mind-body separation he'd learned, but now Ginny was always at the center of everything, he wasn't lying in a comatose state, and the world didn't move in slow motion.

Later, Harry was eating cake, standing with Sirius, Remus, Alex Wood, Bill and Bill's date. Harry wasn't clear about why Alex Wood was there; he knew he was a mate of Bill's from school, but he'd thought the ceremony and reception were going to be more private. He also wasn't clear on how Bill had been permitted a *date*.

"I'm don't want to be rude or anything", he tried to explain, "but why are you here, exactly?" he asked Alex. There was an awkward silence

before Remus responded.

"Actually, Alex is my date. You needn't worry about security. Alex can keep a secret. Bill played matchmaker, you see —"

"Evidently, you can keep a secret, too!" Harry said in surprise. "When, er —"

"For a while now", Alex said, sounding happy. "But it was touch and go there for a while. I thought his undercover work was sure to get him killed. Made me bloody nervous every time he left the flat to go to a werewolf meeting..." Harry found it hard not to picture Oliver Wood; the brothers' voices were almost exactly the same. "Sirius is Remus' best friend in the world; I'd never dream of spilling on him and his lovely bride."

After that, Harry didn't dare ask Bill how he rated a date. Just then, Molly Weasley approached them and asked in a surprisingly imperious voice, "So. Bill. Would you mind terribly introducing me?" Harry stopped chewing his cake, realized that his mouth was open, and shut it abruptly, swallowing with difficulty. Evidently, Bill hadn't told his *mum* about his date.

"Erm, yes, Mum. I believe you might remember Juliet from when I was in school. Juliet Hathaway — I mean, McDonald — this is my mum, Molly Weasley."

"Actually", Juliet — or so Harry assumed — answered, "you were right the first time, Bill. It's Juliet Hathaway again, remember? Since the divorce."

"Divorce?" Molly said suspiciously.

"You remember, Mum", came Charlie's voice now; Harry didn't know when he had joined them. "When I went to the reservation in British Columbia between my fifth and sixth years and learned so much from Juliet's husband, Brendan, one of the handlers."

"Ah, yes. The handler", she said vaguely. "And just how long has this been going on?" she said pointedly. Harry felt extremely embarrassed on Bill's behalf.

"Well, I ran into Juliet in Diagon Alley a little over a year ago, and we started seeing each other again..." Bill said; Harry thought that only he could pick up on the nervousness in Bill's voice, but Molly had also caught it.

"And you were afraid to tell me about this *why*?"

Charlie cleared his throat. "Don't you think you had better tell her, Bill?" he said to his brother in an undertone.

"Tell me what?" Molly said sharply.

Harry could hear Bill and Charlie shuffling their feet; he wondered what on earth had got into them. He pulled on Sirius' sleeve, whispering, "This sounds like a family matter —"

"Well, you're very close to being family, Harry", Molly said to him. "Perhaps I should help my two eldest sons a bit, neither of whom had the decency to tell me, for nearly *sixteen years* that I had a granddaughter!"

The room was very still after she said this, and all Harry could do was drop his jaw in disbelief. Next to him, he heard Sirius mutter, "*Oh, there'll be hell to pay...*"

"You know!" Charlie cried. "So — you didn't need me to remind you about the dragon reservation at all!"

"Yes, I know, thanks to Juliet. We've been corresponding for years. I can keep secrets, too." Harry knew that already, because of the secret of her older daughters.

"Juliet!" Bill cried.

"Well", Juliet said nervously, "I didn't think it right for your mother not to know. I wrote to her years ago. It was while you were still at the reservation, Charlie. I wanted to let her know how grateful I was that you were with me, Natalie's own uncle —"

"Natalie!" Harry said suddenly, unable to stop himself. "D'you mean — Natalie McDonald?"

"That's right", Juliet said quietly.

As the entire story came out, Harry understood now why Mrs. Weasley had told her sons that if they got a girl "in trouble" she'd kill them. She didn't mean it literally, of course, but her feelings about this hadn't just come out of the blue; she'd had some experience with the problem, unbeknownst to Bill, the perpetrator, and Charlie, the de facto Secret Keeper. It was Charlie who got the brunt of Mrs. Weasley's anger, as he'd kept it from her — and Bill — from the start.

"Well, erm — there was that whole thing about the Daughter of War being from our family", Charlie stammered. "How did I know that it wasn't Bill's daughter? It just seemed like a good idea to keep her a secret, safer for her and all..."

"Mm hm", Mrs. Weasley said, sounding unconvinced. She didn't let Bill off completely, though, despite the fact that he'd only learned he had a daughter a year earlier.

"Well, there just didn't seem to be any good time to bring it up, with the war and all", Bill mumbled sheepishly. Harry wished he could see his face, not to mention Molly Weasley's. Harry still couldn't believe that the unassuming fourth-year Gryffindor named Natalie McDonald was Ginny and Ron's niece.

Ginny! He looked for her with his amulet, finding her standing with Ron, just a few feet away, an expression of utter shock on her face. He hugged her.

"So you heard?"

"That I've been an aunt since I was about a year and a half old? Yes, I heard. The thing is, I have a feeling that *Natalie* is the only one who *doesn't* know about her real dad being my brother."

"Well, actually, no she doesn't", Juliet admitted. "Bill and I talked about that. It's very awkward. Brendan and I parted amicably, and Nat's always thought of him as her dad..."

"It's up to you, dear", Molly Weasley said to her, surprising Harry. "No one wants the poor girl to be upset. But you've described Brendan to me as a very understanding person. I don't think Natalie needs to feel that she's losing the father she's always known; she's just getting another one, not to mention, perhaps I can stop sending jumpers and fudge to her with just the excuse that her mother was my son's girlfriend ages ago!" She was actually laughing, and Harry grinned, wondering how much champagne she'd had.

"You sent her Weasley jumpers and fudge?" Ron said, sounded affronted.

"Oh, pish, I sent them to Harry, too, and you never cared", she reminded him.

"Still — we've had a niece right in our own house all this time and never knew it", Ron pressed; Harry remembered how upset he'd been about finding out about his lost sisters.

Harry felt Ginny leave his side and he clutched at the amulet; she was whispering something in the ear of a pretty dark-haired woman with blue eyes. She looked familiar, and he realized both that she must be Juliet and that Natalie had her mother's face. Unlike her mother, he remembered that

Natalie's hair was a mix of red and brown. He shook his head in amazement as he watched Ginny speak to the mother of her niece, then they both lifted their heads to look at the others, grinning.

"We'll be right back. We're going to find Natalie and tell her, so she can join the party —" Ginny said excitedly. Before she and Juliet left, she jostled Harry's arm as she kissed him on the cheek.

"I'll be right back. I'm off to get myself a niece!"

He laughed, continuing to hold onto the amulet while she and Juliet found Natalie in the Gryffindor common room. They hugged and cried and hugged some more before they led her out of the portrait hole and down the stairs. He released the amulet and smiled, knowing that however many new members of the family were added to the Weasleys, it would never make up for Fred's absence, but he also thought it unlikely that a stray member of the family would ever again be permitted to languish without the rest of the clan about to give love and support.

And so the party went on into the wee hours of the night, with all of the living members of the Weasley family together at long last. Harry held Ginny and danced and thought about Sandy's prediction, and thought some more, holding her tightly and feeling that although he'd given up a family in his other life, he had been given another one.

* * *

The rest of the term passed very quickly, it seemed to Harry. It didn't hurt that he and Ginny had been given a room in the staff wing, authorized by none other than Severus Snape. (*"I'll deal with Molly if she gets wind of it,"* he'd said.) Maggie had led him there after the wedding, and he'd been surprised by Ginny already being there in a diaphanous pink dressing gown and nothing else...

Suddenly, his resolute celibacy, maintained since he'd returned from Godric's Hollow, crumbled into nothing. He couldn't remember why he'd denied himself, but lying with her in his arms afterward, listening to the approaching dawn, he remembered. Something to do with feeling like he didn't deserve happiness when Fred was dead, and Hagrid, and Tony and all of the others. As he held her warm body, he thought about the wedding, and Natalie meeting her family for the first time, and realized how utterly stupid this was. To deny himself happiness because others had died would be to put the lie to their deaths. Was it all for nothing? No, it wasn't. Life

went on and they owed it to themselves and those who were gone to clutch at as much happiness as they could while they could.

He squeezed Ginny tightly and started to drift off, but then forced himself awake again. "Ginny?"

"Hmm?"

"I meant to talk to Draco at the reception, but I never got a chance. Do you think he also has a room in the staff wing? Maybe you could help me find it and —"

"*Harry*," she interrupted him.

"What?"

"Well, erm, I was talking to Draco at the reception, and — well, I wanted *him* to talk to you. But he said you're the last person he wants to talk to right now." Her voice was very quiet.

"Did he say why?"

"No."

He'd been unable to speak to Draco during the remainder of the term, as well. Now his final day at Hogwarts had arrived, and he felt rather numb, sitting at the Gryffindor table for the Leaving Feast, clutching the amulet now and then so he could see Ginny, but also so that he could see what bits of the Great Hall were visible around her, the house banners, the other students, the teachers off in the distance, at the head table. Dumbledore had not named a winner of the house competition, but declared that they were all victorious over the darkness that had threatened to swallow up the school and, indeed, the entire wizarding world. Surprisingly, there was a good bit of cheering at this news. Harry had great hope for the future; in September, the first years would be placed in their houses by a random drawing. The board of governors had agreed to Harry's idea.

After the feast, it was time to go to the station. Professor McGonagall gave him a warm hug, which surprised him, and then Mrs. Figg did the same, which was even more of a surprise. For a moment he wondered whether he should ask *her* to somehow get Draco to talk to him, but decided against it. He said goodbye to the other teachers who'd come to see him off, Severus Snape last of all with a fiercely back-slapping embrace, before walking out of the entrance hall. He was no longer a student.

Ron guided Harry up the steps and into the horseless carriage; Harry took off his glasses (which he still habitually wore) and closed his eyes, feeling the gentle swaying movement as they rolled down the drive toward Hogsmeade. When they were nearly at the station, Sandy's voice piped up from under his sleeve, saying the same thing she'd said before he'd entered Dumbledore's office to speak to him. *Not that again*, he thought. *You shall see*. Not really, not the way I'd like to...

All too soon, they had arrived, and Ginny was the one leading him this time, helping him step up onto the platform. He hesitated and felt her pulling on his arm. "Come on, Harry, so we can get a good compartment, all of us together."

He gently pulled away. "I'll be along, Ginny. Give me a minute, all right? You and Ron and Hermione go on ahead; I'll find you."

She sighed and he heard her footsteps recede from him. Taking a deep breath, he turned toward where he thought Hogwarts should be. He imagined it very vividly, the turrets and parapets, countless windows flashing in the sunshine. He'd seen it so many times, and now that he was leaving, he couldn't even have one last glimpse of it. He thought fiercely, *I wish I could just see it one last time...*

He hadn't been able to see Sirius one more time before he left with Alicia for America. They'd departed the night after the wedding, and Harry swore that he'd find a way to come visit them when they were settled. He wasn't sure how he would do it, since the idea of traveling without his sight was daunting, but he was determined to find a way.

"Harry", said a gentle, familiar voice.

"Dumbledore! I mean, Professor Dumbledore..."

The headmaster gave a laugh. "I *would* suggest that you start calling me 'Albus', but I do not think you are ready for that."

Harry swallowed. "Erm, probably not quite ready, sir." He wished now that he could see him *and* the castle. *Wishing won't just make it so*, he reminded himself.

"You don't usually come to see us off", Harry said, feeling awkward. He blinked; his head felt strangely heavy, as though he needed to put it down.

"No, that is true. However, it is not every day that Harry Potter leaves Hogwarts..."

Harry's face felt hot. "You came just to see me off, sir?" There it was again; his head felt strange, almost as though it didn't belong to him. There was a rush of wind in his ears that reminded him of when he'd returned from the Realm of the Dead. He felt distracted and thought again, *I wish I could just see Hogwarts and Dumbledore one more time...*

Unaccountably, he thought he *did* see something, a small pale glow like a distant light on a night with no moon. The glow grew, but then something blocked it, a shadow sitting in the center, while light emanated from either side, not unlike the way Maggie had described auras to him. The something was blurry, but Harry could tell it was tall and bluish. Harry blinked again, unable to make sense of what was happening.

"Are you all right, Harry?" The headmaster sounded more like a concerned father than a headmaster.

"I'm — I don't know what I am", he whispered vaguely. The glow became brighter and brighter, finally filling his entire range of vision. *Vision!* he thought. *I can see!*

"I — I can see. I think", he added uncertainly.

"*What?*" Dumbledore said sharply. "You can *see*? What is it you see?"

The glow was too bright, making it impossible for him to tell what the tall bluish thing was. Harry blinked some more, shaking his head, trying to focus his eyes. Then he remembered — he wasn't wearing his glasses. He reached into his robe pocket and pulled them out. Even with them on, everything didn't immediately come into focus, but he was able to make out the tall thing that was in the middle of the light now.

"*I see you.*"

Harry blinked some more, his focus improving with each blink, and then there he was: Albus Dumbledore, wearing robes of pale, icy blue and a tall matching hat. The robes made his hair and long beard look slightly bluish too, and Harry looked up into the twinkling magical eyes, grinning at the old man.

"I can see you!" He lunged at Dumbledore, throwing his arms around him, and Dumbledore returned the embrace, patting him on the back.

"My dear boy", he choked, and Harry thought he might actually cry.

Harry backed up from him, laughing. "I can *see*, I can really see!" he crowed. He shook his head. "I don't know how, or why, I just know — oh, bloody hell, I don't know anything, except that I can *see*!"

Dumbledore smiled warmly at him, and it was very hard for Harry to believe that the twinkling blue eyes weren't real. "I am very, very happy for you, Harry."

Harry couldn't stop grinning. "That makes two of us. I — I was thinking that I'd like to see Hogwarts one last time, and you too, and it just — it started happening..."

Dumbledore narrowed his eyes now. "How very curious", he said quietly, surveying Harry. "I wonder why the goddess decided to return your sight..."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. Hermione thought — well, I guess it doesn't hurt to tell you now. I asked her not to say anything to anyone, but — she wanted to know what I was thinking when I offered to sacrifice my eyesight, and I told her that I didn't. I offered — I offered my magic. But then, when I got back, I was blind. Hermione's theory was that the goddess saw I was willing to sacrifice something huge and took it easy on me. Of course, it didn't feel like that when I realized I was blind, but — but she must have decided the sacrifice didn't need to be permanent! I can see again!"

But suddenly, where Dumbledore had looked touched and happy for him, he now appeared unspeakably sad, and Harry marveled again at how expressive the magical eyes could be. "What's wrong, sir?"

Dumbledore took a deep breath. "I am — I am just afraid that it may not be as simple as you think, Harry. This — this would be quite out of character for a god or goddess..."

"You mean — you think she might take a different thing from me instead of my sight?"

Dumbledore sighed. "No, Harry. I fear that she already has", he said very quietly.

Harry stared at him. "What do you mean?" But then he happened to look over the headmaster's shoulder, and what he saw in the valley before him made him drop to his knees, sobbing, pushing at his eyes with his hands, under his glasses.

"No, no no, it can't be..."

Where Hogwarts castle should have been, nestled in the leafy vale, was the ruin of a fortress that had seen far better days. It appeared to have been abandoned for hundreds and hundreds of years. Gone were the grand towers, flying the Hogwarts standard. Gone were the flashing windows.

Where the front door should have been, a vine-covered empty archway led to a hall without walls, the remnants of the white marble stair stopping in mid-air, winding up into nothingness.

He shook his head, the truth pounding on his brain, but he resisted, closing his eyes, rubbing them until it was painful, sobbing, "*No, no, no...*"

Dumbledore held out his hand. "Get up, Harry." He said nothing more, but raised his eyebrows and Harry took his hand, standing slowly, his eyes going again to the ruins of Hogwarts castle. He turned to the left, and where he should have seen the bustling village of Hogsmeade was a collection of decrepit shacks, the dry, warm wind blowing the overgrown grasses around them. Turning, Harry saw that even the Hogsmeade station looked long-abandoned, the paint peeling so that one couldn't actually read the name of the village that he'd always seen in shining gold letters picked out against red, on the sign that hung above the platform on twin chains. One of the chains (both of them were rusted) was broken now, so that the illegible sign hung vertically, flapping in the wind.

And the Hogwarts Express... He turned to look at the train, which seemed to have been left on the old tracks at least eighty years earlier. Rust and peeling paint were the rule and not the exception here, as well, and Harry could see no one through the filthy windows. It appeared to be empty and useless.

He whirled to look at Dumbledore again, his mouth working soundlessly. The headmaster put his hand on Harry's arm. The warm reality of the hand grounded Harry, forced him to think, *It hasn't all been a dream. I didn't just imagine that I'm a wizard, that Hogwarts exists, I didn't just concoct it all in my head...*

"Why?" he choked, the only sound he could force from his throat.

Dumbledore shook his head mournfully. "I do not know, Harry. It could be that the blindness was temporarily visited upon you by the goddess to shield from you the truth of your sacrifice. Or to shield others from the truth. Your struggles to cope without your sight *did* serve as an effective distraction to those around you, none of whom seem to have caught on to your no longer being magical."

"But — but — I can still understand Sandy, my snake, when she speaks..."

Dumbledore looked thoughtful for a moment. "Interesting. It could be that the goddess took just the magic with which you were born. You were

not born a Parselmouth, but accidentally received that ability from Voldemort when he attempted to kill you. What were you thinking, exactly, when you decided upon the sacrifice?"

Harry forced himself to meet Dumbledore's eyes, to stop gawping at the run-down train and station, at the abandoned-looking village, and especially at the ruined castle. "I thought — I thought, *Take it, take every bit of magic I had from the day I was born...*"

Dumbledore nodded. "Well, that is precisely what she did."

"But why should she hide from me, or the people around me, what my true sacrifice was?"

Dumbledore raised one eyebrow. "I said that was one possibility, and I do not know what the motive might be for doing such a thing. Another possibility is that the goddess is not responsible for your blindness at all."

Harry frowned. "Who then?"

Dumbledore gave him a very penetrating look. "You do not anger easily, Harry. You tolerated the Dursleys for quite some time, yet when your aunt insulted your parents' memories, you performed accidental magic and inflated her. Why do you think you reacted so strongly to her remarks?"

Harry thought back to the horrid things Aunt Marge had been saying. "Because — because I didn't know anything about my parents yet. I — I think a part of me was afraid that she was right. I couldn't argue back — I didn't have anything I could say to prove her wrong."

Dumbledore nodded. "You were angry with her because you feared she told the truth." Harry nodded, swallowing, as something, a sort of reluctant knowledge, prickled along his scalp. "After you told me of your reaction to Dr. Chaudhri's medical opinion, I spoke to Dr. Anderssen about it", he said. "She told me you were very angry at the suggestion that you were suffering from hysterical blindness."

Harry swallowed, looking around him. "So, you're saying you think she was right? That I *made* myself blind so I would think *that* was the sacrifice?"

Dumbledore squeezed his arm. "Your sacrifice, Harry, was the soul of selflessness. But just because someone is capable of such an act does not mean that they will not feel remorse or regret, even though they also believe that, in the same circumstances, they would do exactly the same thing again. You told yourself it was the right thing to do, and you believed

it, but a part of you couldn't bear to think about the consequences, and so you found a way to avoid doing just that. The blindness let you ignore the real sacrifice. Remember, Harry, how very suggestible you are..."

Harry peered into the twinkling blue eyes. "I thought that was just in connection to my magic." His voice shook, even as he admitted to himself that, yes, he had attempted to hide his sacrifice even from himself, an exercise in denial that robbed him of his very sight.

Dumbledore shrugged. "Muggles have been known to do the same thing, Harry. They simply do not have enough magical genes turned on to be able to use it to augment spells. Clearly, you still have this ability, even without the magic with which you were born."

"Leaving me with being a Parselmouth", he said bitterly. He waited for a second in case Sandy commented, but for once she didn't. "And not being able to see Hogwarts, or Hogsmeade, or —"

"Oh, you can see them", Dumbledore said simply.

Harry threw up his hands. "Well, yes, I can see a ruined castle —"

"That is *you*, Harry. You see ruins because you believe you should. I suspect that you were able, so successfully, to convince yourself that you were blind because you feared, above all, that you would not be able to see Hogwarts again, knowing as you do about the anti-Muggle charms. What you see now", he said, waving his hand at the distant crumbling stone walls, "is what you *expected* to see upon returning, and you could not face that, so you didn't. But you know as well as I that you needn't see the castle this way. You've allowed your fear to override your *knowledge*. Without your magic, you are a Squib, not a Muggle. Squibs can see through anti-Muggle charms. And even Muggles who *expect* to see something magical can see it, as you know from Miss Granger's parents. They attended the memorial here at the school, and you have seen them in Diagon Alley, yes?" Harry nodded, staring at the castle, but failing to see any change. "*Believe, Harry*," said Dumbledore in a soft, urgent voice. The hair stood up on the back of Harry's neck as he remembered Rodney Jeffries healing his burns...

Believe...

He thought of Draco Malfoy *expecting* to be in hell for what he'd done, believing that he should be punished...

Believe...

And then he thought of Maggie and Hermione, who'd seen photographs of the ruined version of Stonehenge, unable to see it as it really was until they made a concerted effort to get past their expectations, to *change* what they believed about the place...

Believe.

Harry blinked repeatedly; slowly, the castle as he knew it came shimmering into view, as though it had been hidden by the Chameleon Transfiguration. He heaved a sigh of relief, seeing the castle as he knew it was, tall and strong and *home*. In its way, Hogwarts would always be his home, there was no doubt about it. He turned to Dumbledore.

"I can see it —"

And then, all at once, it shimmered and shifted, becoming again a pile of ruins. He frowned, but Dumbledore, perhaps seeing the disappointment on his face, squeezed his shoulder. "Give it time, Harry. Start small, with the train, say, since you need to take it back to London." Harry looked at the train again, thinking very hard, remembering the first time he ever saw the Hogwarts Express when he was eleven. He remembered the sight of the scarlet steam engine, of the many carriages, watching Ginny run to catch up with the train, the look of longing on her face as her brothers went off to school; he remembered meeting Ron for the first time, and Hermione, both on the train...

It shimmered into view, but did not revert to a ruin. "I can see it, sir. I — I think I'll be all right. The rest will come with time, you're probably right." He heaved a great sigh and felt a relief wash through him, even as he thought, *Bloody hell, I'm a Squib.*

"Harry", Dumbledore said, putting his hand on his arm as Harry started moving toward the train. "Don't put it off too long."

"Put what off?"

"Telling the others. Your friends. Miss Weasley. And — Mr. Malfoy."

Harry's lip shook and he surveyed the scene of the ruined castle again. He'd only been able to hold the image of the intact castle in his mind for a few moments. "Draco hasn't talked to me since we got back anyway. I'm still not convinced he's going to forgive me for saving his life, any more than Snape wanted to forgive my father. And obviously, I didn't want the others to know about it or I wouldn't have gone to such lengths to hide the truth even from myself. *How* do I tell them that I'm no longer magical?"

Dumbledore pulled him into a firm embrace and then held him at arm's length, smiling warmly at him. "Harry Potter, even as a Squib, you are still the most magical person I have ever known." Harry ducked his head, feeling unaccountably shy, hearing the headmaster say this. "You shall find a way", Dumbledore went on. "Trust me. More importantly — trust yourself. And those about whom you care the most." He released Harry's shoulders and nodded. "Better hurry. They're waiting for you."

Harry turned to see a conductor far down the platform, leaning out of a carriage window, looking at him expectantly. Harry nodded, striding toward the train. When it started to move, he was still standing at the door of the carriage; he opened the window so he could lean out and wave to Professor Dumbledore, who was the only person on the platform. Behind him, the village wavered slightly and appeared, then disappeared again, as though Harry weren't really seeing it, but a mirage. *Give it time*, he reminded himself. He was on the train and could see everything on it with perfect clarity. That was a start.

I can see Ginny again, he realized, his heart leaping at the thought. *And not just with the amulet*. He grinned as he walked down the corridor, lurching when the train went around a slight curve. *I can see Ron, and Hermione, and Snape and Maggie, and —*

He stopped, hearing Hermione's distinctive, incisive voice behind the door of the compartment he was passing. He hesitated before entering, staring at the frosted glass in the door, really seeing for the first time the swirling pattern in the glass. He could also see shadows moving behind the glass. The two red heads were likely to be Ron and Ginny. The two dark ones seemed to be Mariah and Hermione; the light blur could only be Draco Malfoy.

Draco Malfoy. Draco would *have* to talk to him now.

He took a deep breath and slid the door open, looking round at them all, trying to tell himself that he'd rather be able to *see* than do magic. He forced a grin and entered, sitting between Ginny and Ron. Hermione, Mariah and Draco sat opposite them.

"That was very good, Harry", Hermione said, sounding far too much like a dog-trainer for his taste. "If I didn't know better, I'd say that you could actually *see* —"

Harry turned to Ginny, looking deeply into her enormous brown eyes before kissing her, feeling her surprise for a split second before she

succumbed. But after only a moment, she pulled away and stared at him in disbelief, her eyes boring into him.

"*You can see!*" she breathed, tears in her eyes. Harry gave her a genuine smile.

"Yes. I can see."

With an inarticulate cry she pulled him to her again, initiating the kiss this time. When she allowed him to come up for air, he turned to find the other four staring at him in disbelief.

Ron recovered first, letting out a joyful laugh and slapping Harry on the back rather too hard, so that he was knocked to the floor. Hermione helped him stand.

"Sorry, mate, I just — this is brilliant!"

Hermione hugged him quickly, beginning to cry. "Oh, Harry! It's so wonderful! But — but *how? When?*"

"So *that's* what Sandy meant when she said, *You shall see!*" Ginny exclaimed. "She didn't mean *understand* this time..."

"What?" Harry said, frowning at her. "You can understand Sandy?"

"I have done, ever since — well, you know. I thought you realized?"

"No, I didn't!" He stared at her in shock. She laughed.

"But the important thing is that you can see! Only — I don't understand how..."

Harry looked up from her face; Draco Malfoy was visibly shaken. Harry wondered how he'd ended up in this compartment. Perhaps Ginny had talked him into it. Harry looked back at Hermione and Ron. "I'll explain everything, but first —" He held out his hand to Ginny. "I need to talk to you, Ginny. There's — there's something I need to tell you."

Ron looked a bit alarmed. "Now, Harry — don't you think she's a bit young to —"

"Sod off, Ron. I said 'tell', not 'ask'. And mind your own business."

"I think it must be advice about being a Parselmouth", she said, laughing, as Harry took Ginny by the hand and opened the compartment door again, staggering into the corridor and dragging her behind him. They weren't far from the end of the train, so he opened the door to the rear platform. When they were standing together, grasping the rail, Harry could feel the rhythm of the train vibrating through his body. He looked at the greenery on either side of the track but didn't dare look at where he knew the castle should be; he was vaguely aware of it out of the corner of his

eye, but he doggedly avoided looking. Instead he looked at Ginny, cupping her cheek with his hand. She was no longer laughing.

She seemed to be shaking from more than the train's movement, and suddenly he realized that she might be thinking the same thing that Ron had been, that he was going to ask her to marry him. Nothing would have made him happier than for Ginny to agree to spend the rest of her life with him, and he knew that Sandy's prediction practically guaranteed it, but how could he ask her to be with him now? *I'm a Squib*. He suddenly realized that although his mother had told him that he couldn't simply give up Ginny as his sacrifice, by giving up his magic, he *had* given her up as well. How could he expect her to stay with him when —

"Oh, Harry! Doesn't the castle look beautiful like this? I've never stood back here when we've been going home on the train —"

He looked at her profile as she gazed rapturously at Hogwarts castle. She had turned away from him, reddening and he decided that he'd better just tell her before she started expecting him to pull out a ring. He took a deep breath and turned to look. Where he knew the edifice of Hogwarts castle should be, nestled in its green valley, he saw the crumbled walls, the vine-covered ruins, getting smaller bit by bit as they moved away. He didn't have the energy at this moment to try to see what he knew should be there. He shook his head, tears stealing into his eyes.

"Ginny", he choked. "I — I can't see it —"

She turned in alarm. "Oh, Harry! Is your sight going again? Oh my god —" She covered her mouth in horror, then quickly grabbed the rail again to keep from falling. Harry pulled her to him, burying his face in her hair. He couldn't look at her face while he did this, he knew he should, but he couldn't. He held her tightly, whispering the truth into her ear, the words coming in a rush. Her knees started to buckle and he continued to support her limp body as she cried into his neck.

"No, no, tell me you didn't —"

"I had to, Ginny", he choked out. "There was nothing else that —"

"I hate him!" she cried. "I hate that you did this for *him* —" She backed up, her face collapsed in anguish.

"But Ginny — how could I not? He saved your life —"

She bit her lip. "I know, I know — I know I'm being petty..." She took great gulps of air, her hands on his chest. "I love you, Harry. I love how — how selfless you are —"

"No, you don't, not right now. And that's okay, Ginny. It was still the right thing to do", he said quietly. She nodded, her lips drawn into a line.

"I know that, Harry, I really do", she whispered. "And — and I'll get used to this..."

"No, Ginny, I can't ask you to —"

"You are *not* breaking up with me, Harry Potter!" she suddenly growled, throwing her arms around him. "You didn't let Ron walk away from Hermione when he became a werewolf. I love you, not your magic. I'm not upset for myself — I'm upset for *you* —"

"You did *what*?" a familiar voice exclaimed. Draco Malfoy stood in the doorway, his hand on the door handle, his mouth open in shock.

Harry caught his breath. "How long have you been standing there? You won't *talk* to me, but you'll eavesdrop?"

"What, only *you* can eavesdrop on people?" he sneered. "And I'm talking to you now." Harry swallowed, glancing at Ginny.

"Can you give us a few minutes, Ginny?" he asked her, hoping Draco wouldn't bolt.

She nodded and kissed him quickly, slipping past Draco as though afraid to touch him. Draco walked onto the platform, closing the door behind him. He grasped the rail, staring at the receding landscape as the train rattled on, not looking at Harry.

"I wouldn't have done it for you, Harry."

"Yes, you would have. You *did*. If Ginny had died, it would have killed me."

He nodded. "Believe it or not, I thought of that. Not in the split second before I — well. When I first saw that you and Ginny were there. I knew what he would want to do —"

"You've told me that already."

"Don't interrupt", Draco snapped, still not looking at Harry. "I remember thinking — you probably really would fall apart if anything happened to her. I mean, look what you did when she died before — you changed the world."

Harry shook his head. "But that world should never have existed, should it?"

"I know that. And yet — it wasn't all bad, was it?" he said, his voice cracking. "Your sister was in it, after all." Harry looked at his profile now.

A slow tear was trickling down his cheek. One of the rare times Harry had seen Draco cry was in his other life, when he was mourning Jamie —

"You remember!" Harry cried. "Not just from seeing my Pensieve. When you died —"

Draco finally faced him. "Yes, genius, I bloody remember the other life. God, it takes you so long to work things out. Why do you think I didn't want to talk to you?"

Harry was shaken to the core, staring at the other boy, his best friend for so many years, the boy his sister loved, with whom he'd traveled across the country in order to fix the timelines. "So, you — you really remember —"

"Everything, yeah." He grinned for a moment. "I remember being in Granger's flat in London and making her squirm —"

Harry groaned. "Oh, god. Do *not* tell her that you know about that. There was a *reason* why I didn't put that in my Pensieve. Especially if you don't want Ron to rip your lungs out."

Malfoy snorted. "Don't worry, I like my lungs where they are, thanks." He paused, then said, "For what it's worth, though, I *do* like the memories of some of the pranks we played on Weasley. Very satisfying..."

"Yeah, well, we were right little prats when we did those things", Harry said, looking at the passing scenery, not daring to look at Draco.

"I don't know; some of them were really quite clever —"

And then Harry got the surprise of surprises: he got his best friend from his other life back. They stood on the platform, reminiscing about their childhood together, laughing over things Simon and Stuart had done, remembering the pranks they'd pulled with Jamie, being Sorted in their first year, making the Slytherin Quidditch team...

"So why wouldn't you at least talk to me after I told everyone what pillocks they were for not recognizing what you'd done, at the memorial? Not a single word."

Draco swallowed and ducked his head. "Because I hated you. I had asked you to make sure I wouldn't remember that life, and when you brought me back from hell — you plunged me into a *different* hell. All of these memories came rushing back. All of the girls I'd been with because I couldn't be with Jamie, because she was too young. All right, not all of that was *dreadful*... But the memory of losing Jamie was, and something else that I wasn't prepared for at all..."

"What?"

He looked at Harry grimly. "I finally told you, when we were at Godric's Hollow, about the basilisk's egg. But I don't think I'll ever really feel like I deserve to be forgiven for that. You and Ginny could both have died. It was stupid and cowardly. And here I am, walking and talking and *alive* because you gave up your bloody magic for me, the one who did *that*." He swallowed, and Harry saw the guilt etched painfully in his pale features; in the summer sunshine he looked very strange, as though he'd been kept inside for a year, which was perhaps not far from the mark.

"You more than made up for that", Harry said quietly. "I haven't thought about it for ages. Are you still eating yourself up inside about that?"

Draco looked discontented as he said, "Yeah, well, I just got fifteen years of memories dumped in my brain about a month ago and I'm having rather a difficult time sorting all of it out. And now — bloody hell, it was bad enough when the entire wizarding world thought you were *blind* because of me. What's going to happen when everyone finds out that you're a *Muggle* because of me?"

"Squib."

"Whatever! Everyone will want my head on a platter! I'll be getting Howlers around the clock! And death threats, and —" Harry laughed. Draco glowered at him. "What's so funny about getting Howlers and death threats?"

"No, it's not that — I was just remembering that time we sent that Howler to the twins —"

They talked some more, and remembered Jamie quite a lot, and Draco looked a little calmer. Harry put his hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry about what the rest of the world will think. We could keep this quiet, if you like. I was going to keep a bit of a low profile, anyway. I can make a public appearance or two, carefully calculated to let people know I can see again, and I'm sure the hostility against you will go away. I'm going to go back to working for Aberforth this summer. What are your plans?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. I'm heading to the Leaky Cauldron after I get off the train. Staying there until I can get a flat somewhere."

"Well, I contacted my aunt and uncle and they're letting me stay with them for the summer, until I get on my feet. The original theory was that I know my way around their place blindfolded, so it was a better place for

me to be than Ascog Castle. I'll make sure I get the story about my sight into the *Prophet* as soon as possible, and job offers will start pouring in for you..."

Draco shook his head. "What about you? I can't bloody believe you can't play Quidditch again. When I remember that game where you played Keeper for hours and hours —"

Harry grinned. "Youngest captain in the school's history."

Draco punched his shoulder. "And still a braggart, in two lives. Some things never change."

Harry continued to grin happily at him. "No. Some things never do."

* * *

When they returned to the compartment, the others were gasping and saying, "No! What will your mum say?" to Ron and Ginny.

Harry sat down next to Ginny as Ron said, "Well, that's why I don't think Charlie's about to tell my mum..."

Harry frowned; he'd thought they were discussing him at first. "What about Charlie?"

Ron looked about furtively, as though his mother might actually be lurking about, listening. "Well, I heard him talking to Bill at the reception, and it seems that he and Dimitri do more than just 'work' together..."

Hermione hit his arm. "You're becoming a terrible gossip, Ron Weasley. I should put a spell on you to stop up your ears."

"Too late, love", he said cheerfully. "And anyway, I talked to Charlie after that and he told me himself."

Harry's jaw was open. "Well", he said, "I can see how your mum might be a bit, well, surprised. Did you suspect anything?"

"Nah. And then there's the vampire thing, too, but I have to admit, Dimitri seems a good one. But Charlie told me more that he doesn't want mum to know about... Seems he and Dimitri frequently get together with *another* friend..."

"Erg", Draco responded. "Yeah, your mum might be able to handle your brother with *one* bloke, even a vampire, but *two*? I don't think she's that open-minded."

Ron grinned at him. "But the third person *isn't* a bloke. It's that Romanian Seeker, Natasha Whats-er-name. The three of them became *very* close when Charlie used to be on the reservation in Romania..."

Hermione hit Ron again, but he just laughed at her. "S'all right, Hermione. We're not bloody likely to tell my mum what we get up to during the full moon, either, are we?"

Hermione turned deep red at that and Harry couldn't help laughing at her expression. He took Ginny's hand, saying, "Well, then, my bit of news probably won't seem too earth-shattering now, will it?" Taking a deep breath, he explained to the others that he was a Squib.

He was wrong, however, about what their reactions would be; Ron and Hermione were devastated, and Mariah clutched at him, crying, "*Tank ye, oh tank ye, Harry.*" He realized that she was thanking him for making the sacrifice to bring back Draco, and he patted her back awkwardly.

They laughed and talked about many things during the rest of the trip, cried a little over the lost friends, and even discussed the Prophecy.

"I still think that makes you a traitor", Ron said truculently, crossing his arms and glaring at Draco. "I mean, it says, `but the Dark Lord's servant shall betray...'"

"Yeah, but it doesn't say who *gets* betrayed, only that I was going to do it. And yeah, I betrayed *him*, didn't I?"

"I think you betrayed both him *and* Harry", Hermione said logically.

"Yeah", Ron grumbled. "An equal-opportunity traitor."

"He didn't have any choice!" Ginny and Mariah said together.

"Here now", Harry chided them, trying to make peace. Changing the subject slightly, he said, "What I don't understand is that bit at the beginning. How's it go, Ginny?"

"You mean the very beginning? `In days to come, the Dark Lord's fall is split by silver into gold...'"

"Yeah. What does *that* mean? I thought once we'd fulfilled the prophecy it would all be clear..."

Draco Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Well, it's bloody *obvious*, isn't it?" The rest of them stared blankly at him. He threw up his hands. "It means `seventeen!'" They still stared blankly. "As in seventeen years?" he prompted them, starting to look very exasperated.

"Um", Harry said, "how do you get `seventeen' from `silver into gold?'"

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed. "There are seventeen silver Sickles in a gold Galleon!"

"And Granger leaves the rest of them in the dust again..." Draco drawled, his lip curled. "Of course, I left *you*, in the dust, *Head Girl*..."

Hermione ignored him. "Yes! It's been about seventeen years since the first fall... Not precisely seventeen years, but seventeen calendar years, at any rate. Nineteen-eighty-one to Nineteen-ninety-eight!"

Harry shook his head. "I don't think I ever would have thought of that. How did you, Draco?"

He shrugged. "Once you don't have money, you tend to think about it a lot. After my mum disowned me, I had *dreams* about dancing silver Sickles and gold Galleons, taunting me."

"Ah", Ron said, nodding. "That explains it. Your basic greed helped you solve the riddle." Harry thought Draco would be upset, but even he laughed at that. Despite Harry's best efforts to distract the others, however, the conversation kept coming round to his being a Squib. He tried to reassure the others during the rest of the trip, and by the time they were approaching London, Ron and Hermione were no longer looking like they wanted to hex the life out of Draco. As King's Cross drew nearer and nearer, however, Harry held Ginny closer to him, unwilling to let her go.

"We'll work out how we'll see each other during your holiday", he said. It was strange: *your* holiday. He was going to work for Aberforth; no more summer holidays for him. It was the busiest time of year for landscapers. She nodded, her eyes wet.

"I know, I know..."

And then they were all standing on Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters, hugging and kissing and saying their farewells. Harry noticed Bill and Juliet hugging their daughter, as well as another man, big and burly, who must be the father she'd always known. Something gold flashed on Natalie's robes, and he blinked, thinking he was dreaming. He whispered in Ginny's ear and she nodded; they strode over to them and Ginny greeted Bill and Juliet, then leaned over slightly to examine Natalie's amulet. It was a very simple design, a lion in exactly the same posture as the one on the keystone of the fireplace in the Gryffindor common room. There was a small red stone set in it for the eye.

"Natalie — where'd you get that?" Ginny asked her.

Her niece smiled at her and looked down at the amulet, then up again. "It used to be my mum's. Dad gave it to her for her birthday, before I was

born. She gave it to me when I left home to go to Hogwarts. It's nice, isn't it?"

"Yes", she agreed. "Very nice."

"Hold it often, when you're not at home, and you'll feel all right", Harry told her.

She nodded, looking mystified. "I do, and — and that's just how I feel. But — how did you know? And — and can you *see*, Harry?"

He grinned at them all and nodded, and was again in the middle of a circle of people patting his back and pumping his hand. Natalie was shaking his hand convulsively, laughing, and he told her, "Don't let that amulet get away from you, Natalie." She smiled and agreed that she wouldn't.

He and Ginny watched her go through the barrier with her three parents, and then more people found him to say goodbye. Neville was pumping his hand for half a minute before he realized that Harry could see him, then gave him a crushing hug, while Harry laughed at his amazement. Behind Neville's eyes, however, there was a shadow; he and Parvati had had only a little time together before she died. Harry knew how that felt...

Finally, even Draco Malfoy hugged him goodbye, whispering to him, "*I'm not hacked off anymore. I like remembering her. She's — she's a bit like Mariah, yeah?*"

Harry patted his back, replying, "Yeah, there are similarities..." Draco grinned at him before walking toward the barrier, pulling his trunk behind him.

When everyone else was gone, Ruth Pelta was the last to hug Harry and Ginny goodbye; she was also shocked that he could see.

"That's brilliant! Well, you *know* where you *have* to go on your honeymoon now that you can see all of the beautiful sights, don't you?"

"Our *what*?" Ginny squeaked.

"Oh, come on", she said. "You two *are* getting married at some point, right?"

Harry put his arm around Ginny, and, looking down into her eyes, said, "Yeah, of course we are. In about a year. Isn't that right, Ginny?"

She swallowed and answered in a small, shaking voice, "That's right. We — we didn't think anyone else knew." She looked up at him for an instant with shining eyes before turning back to Ruth. "So do tell, where should we go on our honeymoon?"

"Well, it's a Muggle city with images of winged lions everywhere, very appropriate for Harry..."

Not anymore, he thought, remembering flying with Ginny as a golden griffin. But they weren't revealing that to Ruth at this time.

"There is no such place", Ginny said, laughing. "A Muggle city with golden griffins?"

"But in the place I'm talking about, they don't call them golden griffins. Tony and I were going to go..." she said wistfully, quickly wiping away an errant tear. "I'm talking about Venice, of course, you Ninny-Ginny. How often did I tell you about it?"

"Don't call me that", Ginny laughed. "You know I hate it. I'd forgotten about the winged lions, really."

"It's just too bad that next summer is probably too soon..."

"Too soon for what?" Harry wanted to know.

"For the opera house to be rebuilt. It was *glorious*; if I could get someone to grant me one wish, it would be to someday sing there... Unfortunately, it burned down two years ago, but I'm sure it will be rebuilt eventually. It's not called *La Fenice* for nothing."

She bade them goodbye again and turned to walk toward the barrier. Suddenly, Harry thought of something. "Wait, Ruth! What does *La Fenice* mean?"

Ruth smiled benevolently at them both.

"*The Phoenix*."

And then she was gone. Ginny turned to Harry and he swallowed, gazing into her dark eyes. "So — did you mean it?" she breathed, looking frightened.

"Mean it?"

"The proposal!" she said, looking as though she feared it was a joke.

Harry's heart was thumping painfully in his chest. "I did propose, didn't I? Well, in a way." He frowned. "I didn't make a very good job of it, did I? Not like Percy..."

She laughed. "If you'd proposed to me the way Katie told me Percy did to her, I'd think you were an impostor using Polyjuice Potion. It was *perfect*", she assured him, rising to press her lips to his. He gathered her to him, trying to show her how much he loved her and wanted to be with her, no longer afraid of making her miserable. When their mouths separated,

they leaned their brows together, and Harry felt a slight spark when their scars touched.

"We'll get married after your seventh year, and we'll go on a wonderful honeymoon to Venice", he promised. "And we'll look at the winged lions and remember flying together over the Forbidden Forest." She nodded, starting to cry; he laughed, kissing away her tears. "Don't cry, Ginny", he whispered, holding her tightly again.

"I can't help it. I first saw you here, on this train platform, and now you've proposed to me here... You'll just have to put up with some tears, I'm afraid. Happy ones, of course." She smiled lovingly at him and he smiled back.

"All right, then. That's permitted. Shall we go? We have to create an uproar and tell everyone the news, after all."

She laughed as he took her hand and they walked purposefully toward the barrier.

* * *

Harry saw that the Dursleys did not look happy while the Weasleys and Hermione hugged and kissed him and Ginny upon finding out that Harry could see and hearing their good news about the engagement. His aunt and uncle stood awkwardly at the edge of the car park, and Harry could see the slight distance between them, as though they didn't want to stand too close to each other. After he'd hugged Ginny goodbye one last time and she climbed into a taxi with Ron and Hermione (who was staying at the Burrow for a little while), he walked toward his aunt and uncle, pulling his trunk on a station trolley, Hedwig perched on top in her cage as usual.

And then he had it. He knew what he could say to make them happy.

"I've got some good news", he said, smiling, for to them it *would* be good news, very good news. No one else he knew would take it that way, but suddenly he was very pleased that they would. He'd never thought he could do *anything* to make them happy, and for the first time in his life, he had the perfect gift to give them:

A non-magical Harry.

His aunt gasped and his uncle looked flabbergasted. "You mean it? No more — inflating my sister and all that rot?" Vernon Dursley said suspiciously. His news seemed to have distracted them from the fact that he clearly wasn't blind, as Ginny had written in the letter to them. They didn't say a word about this.

Harry assured him that he couldn't do a bit of magic, thinking it wasn't really necessary to tell him about the exception of Sandy, since he'd never told his uncle he could talk to snakes in the first place. His uncle didn't even flinch at his use of the "M" word. His aunt, clearly recovered from losing her magic and also clearly determined to return to her life-long quest for normalcy, sniffed and walked to the car and climbed into the front passenger seat, not speaking.

She stared at Harry in the mirror for some time as they drove. Harry reckoned that all she could probably see of him were his forehead and his hair, and he was prepared to be ordered to get a haircut. She didn't say anything at all until they were on the motorway, heading toward Little Whinging.

"Well!" Aunt Petunia finally said. "Perhaps now you can be talked into getting rid of that *ridiculous* scar!"

THE END

Afterword

A look at some of the people of the wizarding world five years after Harry Potter has left Hogwarts...

Eustace Bean & Cornelius Fudge

Eustace Bean was indeed given the nod for Minister for Magic after Fudge received a vote of no confidence. Bean agreed to lift the curse on the elves and decided that it was not practical to monitor former Slytherins, constituting about twenty-five percent of the wizarding population, nor keep enough Veritaserum on hand for every interrogation. Hogwarts did acquire a few Aurors as guards, but Dumbledore has put them to good use training the members of the Dueling Club, which has continued to be a popular school activity. After leaving office, Fudge found a position in the Centaur Liaison office to which he is still (unrealistically) clinging five years later.

Dennis Creevey

Dennis dated Jamaica Thomas (Dean's sister) briefly when he was in seventh year and she was in sixth, during a period when she and Will Flitwick were having a rough patch. He took up with Gabrielle Delacour after Jamaica and Will made up. After his seventh year, he went to work at the Ministry as a clerk in the department of Magical Law Enforcement. The relationship with Gabrielle didn't stick, however, and he is currently single and still missing his brother a great deal.

Will Flitwick & Jamaica Thomas

After a brief rough patch in their sixth year (see above) Will and Jamaica made up, and a year after finishing school, they married. Will trained to be an Auror and Jamaica went to work at a magical greenhouse; her boss is one Neville Longbottom. They live in a small flat in London.

Dean Thomas

Always artistic, Dean spent his long recovery drawing and sketching a great deal, and afterward decided to go to a Muggle art school. Upon finishing his art training, he took a position as an apprentice with one of the top magical portraitists in Britain, and now has a popular studio in London where he is commissioned to create moving portraits of some of the most well-to-do witches and wizards in Europe.

Ruth Pelta

Always feeling the pull of singing, after finishing her Hogwarts education, Ruth enrolled in the Royal Conservatory to study opera. After completing her studies there, she moved to America to continue her opera studies at the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia (at Hermione's suggestion). She still longs to sing at *La Fenice*, in Venice, which was finally rebuilt a little over four years after she left Hogwarts.

Neville Longbottom

Neville now runs the largest plant nursery in wizarding Britain, supplying most of the botanical ingredients required for potions to apothecaries large and small. Several years after leaving school he met his wife, a fellow botanist from Belarus and former Durmstrang student. and five years after he left school, the two are living happily in Glastonbury and expecting their second child. The first, a daughter named Fern, is two years old.

George, Angelina, Rufus and Rowena Weasley

George continues to be the creative mind behind Weasley's Wizard Wheezes and his wife Angelina has taken over the management of the business from Percy, who is too busy with his Auror career to devote time to this now. Rufus and Rowena began attending the Hogsmeade village school at the age of four and are a constant trial for their teachers.

Percy & Katie Weasley

Both Percy and Katie continue to work as Aurors and do not plan to have children for another few years. They continue to live at Hog's End with George and Angelina's family.

Charlie Weasley

Dumbledore offered Hagrid's old job to Charlie, and he accepted. He tells his mother that he still does not feel inclined to "settle down", despite her frequent "hints." (She is unaware that Dimitri and Natasha are frequent visitors to Hogwarts.) Charlie lives in the staff wing of the castle, as Hagrid's hut was not rebuilt after being destroyed by the giants. Instead, the Rubeus Hagrid Memorial Garden occupies the former site of his home, where Professor Sprout grows many of her deadliest flora in tribute to Hagrid's predilection for dangerous things. Incorrible students are often given the job of weeding in the garden as detention. Charlie's taste in magical creatures — apart from dragons — proves to be more benign than Hagrid's, and Care of Magical Creatures becomes very popular.

Bill Weasley, Juliet Hathaway & Natalie McDonald

Bill and Juliet married in a registry office soon after George and Angelina's wedding, and the two of them, with Natalie, moved into a cottage in the village of Ottery St. Catchpole to be close to Molly and Arthur. Natalie became Head Girl in her seventh year, making her mother and both of her fathers very proud. Bill returned to working for Gringotts (London branch) and Juliet continued her job with Sweetbriar Publishing; she edited Draco Malfoy's biography and is now editing a history of the war.

Nita Anderssen & Sam Bell

Nita has opened a small practice in Diagon Alley and occasionally consults at St. Mungo's. She stays in contact with her adoptive parents,

writes to her Aunt Cissy in New Azkaban, and also sees her siblings and Molly and Arthur regularly. She and Sam are still nervous about marriage, but Molly hopes that one year soon they may both change their minds, especially as Nita continues to live with Sam in his flat at the edge of London. Sam has progressed through the ranks at the Ministry to become assistant to the head of Magical Law Enforcement (having nothing to do with his personal connection to his boss), and as a former resident of Azkaban is working to make New Azkaban more of a place of rehabilitation.

Maggie Dougherty & Severus Snape

Maggie was offered the post of Professor of Divination by Dumbledore, which she accepted. (She goes by "Professor Dougherty" to avoid confusion with the *other* Professor Snape.) She and Severus spend their summers sailing with his uncle and inviting her family members — and Harry — to join them aboard the Patricia for various lengths of time. They currently have no plans to be parents, something that Molly is trying to change.

Molly & Arthur Weasley

Arthur is the head of Magical Law Enforcement, overseeing his former department (Misuse of Muggle Artifacts) as well as all of the Aurors and New Azkaban, ably assisted by Sam Bell. Molly spends her time doting on her grandchildren, Rufus, Rowena and Natalie, and "subtly" nagging her other children to produce more of them for her to dote on, or for Charlie, now the only bachelor, to marry.

Remus Lupin & Alex Wood

Remus and Alex are still a couple five years later and they regularly visit Sirius, Alicia and little Arne (although those are no longer their names) as well as Harry and Ginny. Remus is head of Part-Human Relations at the Ministry and Ron is his Assistant in charge of Werewolf Affairs. Alex is the assistant coach for Puddlemere United, his brother's team.

Sirius Black & Alicia Spinnet Davies

Now living on Hogarth Island, off the coast of Maine, Sirius goes by the name of Newf Lyon ("Newf" is short for "Newfoundland.") Alicia is known as his wife, Lizzie, and little Arne is growing up as James Lyon. Sirius runs a wizarding fishery and Alicia is teaching children at the village school. They plan to send "James" to the Bleecker Street Academy for Boys when he is old enough (a wizarding school in Greenwich Village in Manhattan).

Arabella Figg & Alastor Moody

Dumbledore managed to convince Arabella and Alastor to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts as a team and their quarrels and duels during lessons have already become legends, while DADA teachers lasting only a year have become a thing of the past.

Vernon & Petunia Dursley

Vernon continues to run the Grunnings Drill Factory and Petunia has finally become head of the local Royal Horticultural society, although annually Dunkirk ruins her chances of producing award-winning Princess Diana roses. Harry has still not convinced her to come visit him during the time of his local flower show, but he keeps trying.

Albus Dumbledore

Albus Dumbledore continues to be headmaster of Hogwarts, although five years after Harry's seventh year he is starting to feel that it may be time to retire and let Minerva McGonagall take over.

Draco Malfoy & Mariah Kirkner

Draco took a few years to write his biography; upon publication it was a best-seller and he became more famous and in-demand than Gilderoy Lockhart. Five years after leaving school, he is still seeing Mariah off and on, but he also sometimes sees other witches. He is still unaccustomed to the idea of being a celebrity and has bought a Quidditch team — the Tutshill Tornados — largely so that he could make himself Seeker. Mariah works as a clerk at the Ministry in Transportation and is still waiting for him to see the light.

Ron Weasley & Hermione Granger

Ron works for Remus and is in charge of Werewolf Affairs at the Ministry. He and Hermione married three years after leaving school (she kept her name, to Molly's chagrin) and have no plans to have children at the present time. Hermione works in the Department of Mysteries as an Unspeakable and spends her spare time trying to get her husband to stop trying to worm secrets out of her. They reside in an old manor house near Stratford-upon-Avon.

Ginny Weasley

Ginny became Head Girl in her seventh year and spent the time missing Harry a great deal, staying busy by and playing Seeker for the Gryffindor Quidditch team and serving as captain of the Dueling Club. Soon after she finished her seventh year, she married Harry and they went on their Venetian honeymoon. Following that, she went to live with him in America, where she took a job as the flying instructor at Cresheim Hall, on the outskirts of Philadelphia (a girls' magic school and sister school to Bleecker Street).

Harry Potter

After spending only half of the summer working for Aberforth, Harry traveled to America to visit Sirius, then continued to travel about, finally deciding to apply to Muggle university in Philadelphia. The following May he returned to Britain and married Ginny in early July; she went right to work (see above) while he continued his studies. After receiving a

degree in Physical Education (he felt sports were his only real talent), he took a position teaching at a Quaker school, where the students regularly tease him (good-naturedly) for calling soccer "football" and baseball "rounders." He and Ginny live in a cottage in the woods near Cresheim Hall, where she teaches under her maiden name and pointedly does not reveal to her students that she is married to Harry Potter. Three years after marrying, they became the parents of David James Potter. After she moved to Philadelphia to continue her opera studies, Ruth Pelta became one of his regular baby-sitters whenever Harry and Ginny wished to go out (except when it was for the purpose of hearing Ruth give a recital). They have two cats, MacKenzie and Bainbridge, and also share their home with a small garden snake named Sandy, with whom they converse regularly. Except for his interactions with Sandy, Harry has not done any magic since performing the *Enuma Elish* spell. Despite his aunt's wishes, he and Ginny still have their matching scars.